

PENGUIN BOOKS

GREAT IDEAS

YOUR INQUISITOR
DOESN'T BELIEVE IN
GOD, THAT'S HIS
WHOLE
SECRET



THE
GREAT
INQUISITOR

FYODOR
DOSTOYEVSKY

Fyodor Dostoyevsky
1821–1881

Fyodor Dostoyevsky
The Grand Inquisitor

TRANSLATED BY DAVID MCDUFF

PENGUIN BOOKS — GREAT IDEAS

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Note

‘The Grand Inquisitor’ is a ‘poema’ or narrative argument from Book Five of *The Brothers Karamazov*, which considers the idea of freedom. In the preceding chapter, Ivan introduces it to his brother Aloysha:

‘Listen Aloysha, don’t laugh, but I once composed a poema – I did it about a year ago. If you’re able to waste another ten minutes or so with me, would you let me tell you what it says?’

‘You’ve written a poema?’

‘Oh no, I didn’t write it,’ Ivan said, laughing, ‘never in my life have I written down so much as two lines of verse. No, I dreamed this poema up and committed it to memory. I dreamed it up with passion. You shall be my first reader, or listener, rather,’ Ivan said with an ironic smile. ‘Shall I tell you what it says or not?’

‘By all means,’ Aloysha managed to get out.

‘My poema is entitled “The Grand Inquisitor”, a preposterous thing, but I feel like telling it to you.’

In ‘The House of the Dead’ Dostoyevsky recreates the time he spent in a Siberian convict prison through his fictionalized narrator Alekzandr Petrovich Goryanchikov.

‘The Grand Inquisitor’ from *The Brothers Karamozov*

‘You see, even here we can’t get by without a preface – a literary preface, that is, confound it!’ Ivan said, laughing. ‘And what kind of an author am I? Look, the action of my poem takes place in the sixteenth century, and back then – as a matter of fact, this ought still to be familiar to you from your days at school – back then it was the custom in works of poetry to bring the celestial powers down to earth. Dante I need hardly mention. In France the magistrates’ clerks and also the monks in the monasteries used to give entire dramatic spectacles in which they brought on to the stage the Madonna, the angels, the saints, Christ and even God Himself. Back in those days it was all very unsophisticated. In Victor Hugo’s *Notre Dame de Paris*, under the reign of Louis XI, an edifying spectacle is given to the people free of charge in the auditorium of the Paris Town Hall, to celebrate the birthday of the French Dauphin, under the title *Le bon jugement de la très sainte et gracieuse Vierge Marie*, in which she herself appears in person and pronounces her *bon jugement*. In our own country, in the Moscow of pre-Petrine antiquity, dramatic spectacles of almost the same kind, especially of stories from the Old Testament, also took place from time to time; but, in addition to dramatic spectacles, there passed throughout all the world a large number of tales and “verses” in which when necessary the saints, the angels and all the powers of heaven wrought their influence. The monks in our monasteries also occupied themselves with the translation, copying and even the composition of such poems, and in such times, too: under the Tartar yoke. There is, for example, a certain little monastic poem (from the Greek, of course) entitled *The Journey of the Mother of God Through the Torments*, with scenes and with a boldness that are not inferior to those of Dante. The Mother of God visits hell, and her guide

through the “torments” is the Archangel Michael. She beholds the sinners and their sufferings. This hell, incidentally, contains a most entertaining category of sinners in a burning lake: those of them who sink into this lake so deep that they are unable to swim to its surface again are “forgotten by God” – a phrase of exceptional force and profundity. And lo, the shocked and weeping Mother of God falls down before God’s throne and appeals to him to grant forgiveness to all who are in hell, all whom she has seen there, without distinction. Her entreaty with God is of colossal interest. She implores him, she will not depart, and when God draws her attention to the nailed hands and feet of His Son and asks her: “How can I forgive his torturers?” she commands all the saints, all the martyrs, all the angels and archangels to fall down together with her and pray for the forgiveness of all without discrimination. The upshot of it is that she coaxes from God a respite from the torments each year, from Good Friday to Whit Sunday, and out of hell the sinners at once thank the Lord and loudly cry unto Him: “Just and true art thou, O Lord, that thou hast judged thus.” Well, my little poem would have been in similar vein, had it appeared in those days. He appears on my proscenium; to be sure, in my poem. He does not say anything, only makes his appearance and goes on his way. Fifteen centuries have now passed since He made his vow to come in his kingdom, fifteen centuries since his prophet wrote: “Behold, I come quickly.” “But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, not even the Son, but only my Father in heaven,” as He himself prophesied while yet on the earth. But humankind awaits him with its earlier faith and its earlier tender emotion. Oh, with even greater faith, for fifteen centuries have now passed since the pledges have ceased to be lent to man from the heavens:

Thou must have faith in what the heart saith,
For the heavens no pledges lend.

‘And only faith in that which is said by the heart! To be sure, there were many miracles back in those days. There were saints who effected miraculous healings; to some righteous men, according to their life chronicles, the Queen of Heaven herself came down. But the Devil does not slumber, and in humankind there had already begun to grow a doubt in the genuineness of these miracles.

Just at that time there appeared in the north, in Germany, a terrible new heresy. An enormous star, “burning as it were a lamp” (that’s the church, you see), “fell upon the fountains of the waters, and they were made bitter”. These heresies began blasphemously to contradict the miracles. But all the more ardent was the faith of those who remained true believers. The tears of humankind ascended to Him as before, He was awaited, loved, trusted in, people thirsted to suffer and die for him, as before... And for how many centuries had humankind prayed with faith and ardour: “O God the Lord, show us light”, for how many centuries had it appealed to Him that He, in His immeasurable compassion, should deign to come down among His supplicants. He had been known to condescend before and had visited certain men of righteousness, martyrs and holy cenobites while yet they lived on earth, as it is written in their “Lives”. Among us Tyutchev, who believed profoundly in the truth of His words, announced that

Weighed down by the Cross’s burden,
All of you, my native land,
Heaven’s Tsar in servile aspect
Trudged while blessing, end to end.

Which really was the case, I do assure you. And so it happens that He conceives the desire to manifest Himself, if only for an instant, to His people – to His struggling, suffering, stinkingly sinful people that none the less childishly love Him. My poem is set in Spain, at the most dreadful period of the Inquisition, when bonfires glowed throughout the land every day to the glory of God and

In resplendent *autos-da-fé*
Burned the wicked heretics.

Oh, this is not, of course, that coming in which He will appear, according to His promise, at the end of days in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory and which will take place suddenly, “as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west”. No, He has conceived the desire to visit his children at least for an instant and precisely in those places where the bonfires of

heretics had begun to crackle. In His boundless mercy He passes once more among men in that same human form in which for three years He walked among men fifteen centuries earlier. He comes down to the “hot streets and squares” of the southern town in which only the previous day, in a “resplendent *auto-da-fé*”, in the presence of the king, the court, the knights, the cardinals and the loveliest ladies of the court, in the presence of the numerous population of all Seville, there have been burned by the Cardinal Grand Inquisitor very nearly a good hundred heretics all in one go, *ad majorem gloriam Dei*. He has appeared quietly, unostentatiously, and yet – strange, this – everyone recognizes Him. That could have been one of the best bits in my poem – I mean, the question of why it is that everyone recognizes him. The people rush towards him with invincible force, surround him, mass around him, follow him. Saying nothing, He passes among them with a quiet smile of infinite compassion. The sun of love burns in his heart, the beams of Light, Enlightenment and Power flow from his eyes and, as they stream over people, shake their hearts with answering love. He stretches out His arms to them, blesses them, and from one touch of Him, even of His garments, there issues a healing force. Then from the crowd an old man, blind since the years of his childhood, exclaims: “O Lord, heal me, that I may behold thee,” and lo, it is as though the scales fall from the blind man’s eyes, and he sees Him. The people weep and kiss the ground on which He walks. The children throw flowers in his path, singing and crying to Him: “Hosannah!” “It’s Him, it’s Him,” they all repeat, “it must be Him, it can’t be anyone but Him.” He stops in the parvis of Seville Cathedral just at the moment a white, open child’s coffin is being borne with weeping into the place of worship: in it is a seven-year-old girl, the only daughter of a certain noble and distinguished citizen. The dead child lies covered in flowers. “He will raise up your child,” voices cry from the crowd to the weeping mother. The cathedral *pater* who has come out to meet the coffin looks bewildered and knits his brows. But then the mother of the dead child utters a resounding wail. She throws herself at his feet: “If it is You, then raise up my child!” she exclaims, stretching out her arms to him. The procession stops, the coffin is lowered to the parvis floor, to his feet. He gazes with compassion, and his lips softly pronounce again: “*Talitha cumi*” – “Damsel, I say unto thee, arise.” The girl rises in her coffin, sits up and looks around her, smiling, with astonished, wide-open eyes. In

her arms is the bouquet of white roses with which she had lain in the coffin. Among the people there are confusion, shouts, sobbing, and then suddenly, at that very moment, on his way past the cathedral comes the Cardinal Grand Inquisitor himself. He is an old man of almost ninety, tall and straight, with a withered face and sunken eyes, in which, however, there is still a fiery, spark-like gleam. Oh, he is not dressed in his resplendent cardinal's attire, the attire in which yesterday he showed himself off before the people as the enemies of the Roman faith were being burned – no, at this moment he wears only his old, coarse, monkish cassock. Behind him at a certain distance follow his surly assistants and servants and the “Holy” Guard. He stops before the crowd and observes from a distance. He has seen it all, has seen the coffin being put down at His feet, has seen the damsel rise up, and a shadow has settled on his face. He knits his thick, grey brows, and his eyes flash with an ill-boding fire. He extends his index finger and orders the guards to arrest Him. And lo, such is his power and so accustomed, submissive and tremblingly obedient to him are the people that the crowd immediately parts before the guards, and they, amidst the sepulchral silence that has suddenly fallen, place their hands on Him and march Him away. Instantly, the crowd, almost as one man, bow their heads to the ground before the Elder-Inquisitor, and without uttering a word he blesses the people and passes on his way. The Guard conduct the Captive to a narrow and murky vaulted prison in the ancient building of the Ecclesiastical Court and lock Him up in it. The day goes by, and the dark, passionate and “unbreathing” Seville night begins. The air “of lemon and of laurel reeks”. In the midst of the deep murk the prison's iron door is suddenly opened and the old Grand Inquisitor himself slowly enters the prison with a lamp in his hand. He is alone, the door instantly locks again behind him. He pauses in the entrance and for a long time, a minute or two, studies His face. At last he quietly goes up to Him, places the lamp on the table and says to Him:

“Is it you? You?” Receiving no answer, however, he quickly adds: “No, do not reply, keep silent. And in any case, what could you possibly say? I know only too well what you would say. And you have no right to add anything to what was said by you in former times. Why have you come to get in our way? For you have come to get in our way, and you yourself know it. But do you know what will happen tomorrow? I do not know who you are, and I do

not want to know: you may be He or you may be only His likeness, but tomorrow I shall find you guilty and burn you at the stake as the most wicked of heretics, and those same people who today kissed your feet will tomorrow at one wave of my hand rush to rake up the embers on your bonfire, do you know that? Yes, I dare say you do," he added in heartfelt reflection, not for one moment removing his gaze from his Captive.'

'I don't quite understand this part of it, Ivan,' Alyosha smiled; all the time he had listened in silence. 'Is it simply an immense fantasy, or is it some mistake on the part of an old man, some impossible *quiproquo*?'

'Why don't you assume it's the latter.' Ivan burst out laughing. 'If you've been so spoiled by contemporary realism that you can't endure anything fantastic and you want it to be a *quiproquo*, then so be it. It certainly can't be denied,' he laughed again, 'that the old man is ninety, and might easily have long ago been driven insane by the idea that is in his mind. On the other hand, the Captive might have struck him by His appearance. Or it might simply have been a hallucination, the vision of a ninety-year-old man on the threshold of death, given added feverish intensity by the previous day's *auto-da-fé* of a hundred burned heretics. Is it not, however, a matter of indifference to us whether it's a *quiproquo*, or whether it's a colossal fantasy? The point is merely that the old man wants to speak his mind, to finally say out loud the things he has kept silent about for ninety years.'

'And the Captive says nothing either? Gazes at him, but says no word?'

'But that is how it must be in all such instances,' Ivan laughed again. 'The old man himself remarks to Him that He has not the right to add anything to what has already been said by Him in former times. If one cares to, one can see in that statement the most basic characteristic of Roman Catholicism, in my opinion, at least; it's as if they were saying: "It was all told by you to the Pope and so it is now all of it in the Pope's possession, and now we should appreciate it if you would stay away altogether and refrain from interfering for the time being, at any rate." That is the sense in which they not only speak but also write, the Jesuits, at least. I've read such things in the works of their theologians. "Do you have the right to divulge to us so much as one of the mysteries of the world from which you have come?" my old man asks Him, supplying the

answer himself: "No, you do not, lest you add anything to what has already been said by you, and lest you take away from people the freedom you so stood up for when you were upon the earth. Anything new that you divulge will encroach upon people's freedom to believe, for it will look like a miracle and their freedom to believe was what mattered to you most even back then, fifteen hundred years ago. Was it not you who so often used to say back then: 'I want to make you free'? Well, but now you have seen those 'free' people," the old man suddenly adds with a thoughtful and ironic smile. "Yes, this task has cost us dearly," he continues, looking at him sternly, "but we have at last accomplished it in your name. For fifteen centuries we have struggled with that freedom, but now it is all over, and over for good. You don't believe that it is over for good? You look at me meekly and do not even consider me worthy of indignation? Well, I think you ought to be aware that now, and particularly in the days we are currently living through, those people are even more certain than ever that they are completely free, and indeed they themselves have brought us their freedom and have laid it humbly at our feet. But we were the ones who did that, and was that what you desired, that kind of freedom?" '

'Once again I don't understand,' Alyosha broke in. 'Is he being ironic, is he laughing?'

'Not at all. What he is doing is claiming the credit for himself and his kind for at last having conquered freedom and having done so in order to make people happy. "For only now" (he is talking about the Inquisition, of course) "has it become possible to think for the first time about people's happiness. Man is constituted as a mutineer; can mutineers ever be happy? You were given warnings," he says to Him, "you had plenty of warnings and instructions, but you did not obey them, you rejected the only path by which people could have been made happy, but fortunately when you left you handed over the task to us. You gave your promise, you sealed it with your word, you gave us the right to bind and loose, and so of course you cannot even dream of taking that right from us now. So why have you come to get in our way?" '

'I wonder if you could explain the meaning of that phrase: "you had plenty of warnings and instructions"?' Alyosha asked.

'Yes, well, that is exactly the point on which the old man wants to speak his mind.'

‘ “The terrible and clever Spirit, the Spirit of self-annihilation and non-existence,” the old man continues, “that great Spirit spoke with you in the wilderness, and we are told in the Scriptures that it ‘tempted’ you. Is that so? And would it be possible to say anything more true than those things which he made known to you in three questions and which you rejected, and which in the Scriptures are called ‘temptations’? Yet at the same time, if ever there took place on the earth a truly thunderous miracle, it was on that day, the day of those three temptations. Precisely in the emergence of those three questions did the miracle lie. Were one to imagine, just for the sake of experiment and as an example, that those three questions put by the terrible Spirit had been lost without trace from the Scriptures and that it was necessary to reconstruct them, invent and compose them anew so they could again be entered in the Scriptures, and for this purpose to gather together all the sages of the earth – the rulers, the high priests, the scholars, the philosophers, the poets, and give them the task of inventing, composing three questions, but of such a kind that would not only correspond to the scale of the event but would also express, in three words, in but three human phrases, the entire future history of the world and mankind – then do you suppose that all the great wisdom of the earth, having united together, would be able to invent anything at all even remotely equivalent in power and depth to those three questions that were actually put to you that day by the mighty and clever Spirit in the wilderness? Why, by those very questions alone, by the sheer miracle of their emergence it is possible to gain the realization that one is dealing not with a fleeting human intelligence, but with one that is eternal and absolute. For it is as if in those three questions there is conjoined into a single whole and prophesied the entire subsequent history of mankind, there are manifested the three images in which all the unresolved historical contradictions of human nature throughout all the earth will coincide. Back then this was not as yet evident for the future was unknown, but now after the passage of fifteen centuries we can see that everything in those three questions was the product of such foresight and foreknowledge and was so reasonable that it is no longer possible to add anything to them or to remove anything from them.

‘ “Decide for yourself who was right: You or the One who questioned You that day? Remember the first question, though not

in literal terms, its sense was this: 'You want to go into the world and are going there with empty hands, with a kind of promise of freedom which they in their simplicity and inborn turpitude are unable even to comprehend, which they go in fear and awe of – for nothing has ever been more unendurable to man and human society than freedom! Look, you see those stones in that naked, burning hot wilderness? Turn them into loaves and mankind will go trotting after you like a flock, grateful and obedient, though ever fearful that you may take away your hand and that your loaves may cease to come their way.' But you did not want to deprive man of freedom and rejected the offer, for what kind of freedom is it, you reasoned, if obedience is purchased with loaves? You retorted that man lives not by bread alone, but are you aware that in the name of that same earthly bread the Earth Spirit will rise up against you and fight with you and vanquish you, and everyone will follow it, crying: 'Who is like unto this beast, he has given us fire from heaven!' Are you aware that centuries will pass, and mankind will proclaim with the lips of its wisdom and science that there is no crime and consequently no sin either, but only the hungry. 'Feed them, and then ask virtue of them!' – that is what will be inscribed upon the banner they will raise against you and before which your temple will come crashing down. In the place of your temple there will be erected a new edifice, once again a terrible Tower of Babel will be erected, and even though this one will no more be completed than was the previous one, but even so you would be able to avoid that new Tower and abbreviate the sufferings of the human beings by a thousand years, for after all, it is to us that they will come, when they have suffered for a thousand years with their Tower! Then they will track us down again under the ground, in the catacombs, hiding (for we shall again be persecuted and tortured), they will find us and cry to us: 'Feed us, for those who promised us fire from heaven have not granted it.' And then we shall complete their Tower, for it is he that feeds them who will complete it, and it is only we that shall feed them, in your name, and lie that we do it in your name. Oh, never, never will they feed themselves without us! No science will give them bread while yet they are free, but the end of it will be that they will bring us their freedom and place it at our feet and say to us: 'Enslave us if you will, but feed us.' At last they themselves will understand that freedom and earthly bread in sufficiency for all are unthinkable together, for never, never will

they be able to share between themselves! They will also be persuaded that they will never be able to be free, because they are feeble, depraved, insignificant and mutinous. You promised them the bread of heaven, but, I repeat again, can it compare in the eyes of a weak, eternally depraved and eternally dishonourable human race with the earthly sort? And if in the name of the bread of heaven thousands and tens of thousands follow you, what will become of the millions and tens of thousand millions of creatures who are not strong enough to disdain the earthly bread for the heavenly sort? Or are the only ones you care about the tens of thousands of the great and the strong, while the remaining millions, numerous as the grains of sand in the sea, weak, but loving you, must serve as mere raw material for the great and the strong? No, we care about the weak, too. They are depraved and mutineers, but in the end they too will grow obedient. They will marvel at us and will consider us gods because we, in standing at their head, have consented to endure freedom and rule over them – so terrible will being free appear to them at last! But we shall say that we are obedient to you and that we rule in your name. We shall deceive them again, for we shall not let you near us any more. In that deception will be our suffering, for we shall be compelled to lie. That is the significance of the first question that was asked in the wilderness, and that is what you rejected in the name of freedom, which you placed higher than anything else. Yet in that question lay the great secret of this world. Had you accepted the ‘loaves’, you would have responded to the universal and age-old anguish of man, both as an individual creature and as the whole of mankind, namely the question: ‘Before whom should one bow down?’ There is for man no preoccupation more constant or more nagging than, while in a condition of freedom, quickly to find someone to bow down before. But man seeks to bow down before that which is already beyond dispute, so far beyond dispute that all human beings will instantly agree to a universal bowing-down before it. For the preoccupation of these miserable creatures consists not only in finding that before which I or another may bow down, but in finding something that everyone can come to believe in and bow down before, and that it should indeed be *everyone*, and that they should do it *all together*. It is this need for a *community* of bowing-down that has been the principal torment of each individual person and of mankind as a whole since the earliest ages. For the sake of a

universal bowing-down they have destroyed one another with the sword. They have created gods and challenged one another: 'Give up your gods and come and worship ours or else death to you and to your gods!' And so it will be until the world's end, when even gods will vanish from the world: whatever happens, they will fall down before idols. You knew, you could not fail to know that peculiar secret of human nature, but you rejected the only absolute banner that was offered to you and that would have compelled everyone to bow down before you without dispute – the banner of earthly bread, and you rejected it in the name of freedom and the bread of heaven. Just take a look at what you did after that. And all of it again in the name of freedom! I tell you, man has no preoccupation more nagging than to find the person to whom that unhappy creature may surrender the gift of freedom with which he is born. But only he can take mastery of people's freedom who is able to set their consciences at rest. With bread you were given an undisputed banner: give bread and man will bow down, for nothing is more undisputed than bread, but if at the same time someone takes mastery of his conscience without your knowledge – oh, then he will even throw down your bread and follow the one who seduces his conscience. In that you were right. For the secret of human existence does not consist in living, merely, but in what one lives for. Without a firm idea of what he is to live for, man will not consent to live and will sooner destroy himself than remain on the earth, even though all around him there be loaves. That is so, but how has it worked out? Instead of taking mastery of people's freedom, you have increased that freedom even further! Or did you forget that peace of mind and even death are dearer to man than free choice and the cognition of good and evil? There is nothing more seductive for man than the freedom of his conscience, but there is nothing more tormenting for him, either. And so then in place of a firm foundation for the easing of the human conscience once and for all – you took everything that was exceptional, enigmatic and indeterminate, took everything that was beyond people's capacity to bear, and therefore acted as though you did not love them at all – and who was this? The one who had come to sacrifice his life for them! Instead of taking mastery of people's freedom, you augmented it and saddled the spiritual kingdom of man with it for ever. You desired that man's love should be free, that he should follow you freely, enticed and captivated by you.

Henceforth, in place of the old, firm law, man was himself to decide with a free heart what is good and what is evil, with only your image before him to guide him – but surely you never dreamed that he would at last reject and call into question even your image and your truth were he to be oppressed by so terrible a burden as freedom of choice? They will exclaim at last that the truth is not in you, for it would have been impossible to leave them in more confusion and torment than you did when you left them so many worries and unsolvable problems. Thus, you yourself laid the foundation for the destruction of your own kingdom, and no one else should be blamed for it. And yet is that really what was offered you? There are three powers, only three powers on the earth that are capable of eternally vanquishing and ensnaring the consciences of those feeble mutineers, for their happiness – those powers are: miracle, mystery and authority. You rejected the first, the second and the third, and yourself gave the lead in doing so. When the wise and terrible Spirit set you on a pinnacle of the temple and said to you: ‘If you would know whether you are the Son of God, then cast yourself down from hence, for it is written that the angels will take charge of him and bear him up, and he will not fall and dash himself to pieces – and then you will know if you are the Son of God, and will prove how much faith you have in your Father.’ But having heard him through, you rejected his offer and did not give way and did not cast yourself down. Oh, of course, in that you acted proudly and magnificently, like God, but people, that weak, mutinying tribe – are they gods? Oh, that day you understood that by taking only one step, the step of casting yourself down, you would instantly have tempted the Lord and would have lost all faith in him, and would have dashed yourself to pieces against the earth which you had come to save, and the clever Spirit which had tempted you would rejoice. But, I repeat, are there many such as you? And could you really have supposed, even for a moment, that people would have the strength to resist such a temptation? Is human nature really of a kind as to be able to reject the miracle, and to make do, at such terrible moments of life, moments of the most terrible fundamental and tormenting spiritual questions, with only a free decision of the heart? Oh, you knew that your great deed would be preserved in the Scriptures, would attain to the depth of the ages and to the outermost limits of the earth, and you hoped that, in following you, man too would make do with God,

not requiring a miracle. But you did not know that no sooner did man reject the miracle than he would at once reject God also, for man does not seek God so much as miracles. And since man is not strong enough to get by without the miracle, he creates new miracles for himself, his own now, and bows down before the miracle of the quack and the witchcraft of the peasant woman, even though he is a mutineer, heretic and atheist a hundred times over. You did not come down from the Cross when they shouted to you, mocking and teasing you: 'Come down from the Cross and we will believe that it is You.' You did not come down because again you did not want to enslave man with a miracle and because you thirsted for a faith that was free, not miraculous. You thirsted for a love that was free, not for the servile ecstasies of the slave before the might that has inspired him with dread once and for all. But even here you had too high an opinion of human beings, for of course, they are slaves, though they are created mutineers. Look around you and judge, now that fifteen centuries have passed, take a glance at them: which of them have you borne up to yourself? Upon my word, man is created weaker and more base than you supposed! Can he, can he perform the deeds of which you are capable? In respecting him so much you acted as though you had ceased to have compassion for him, because you demanded too much of him – and yet who was this? The very one you had loved more than yourself! Had you respected him less you would have demanded of him less, and that would have been closer to love, for his burden would have been lighter. He is weak and dishonourable. So what if now he mutinies against your power and is proud of his mutiny? This is the pride of a small boy, a schoolboy. These are little children, mutinying in class and driving out their teacher. But the ecstasy of the little boys will come to an end, it will cost them dearly. They will overthrow the temples and soak the earth in blood. But at last the stupid children will realize that even though they are mutineers, they are feeble mutineers, who are unable to sustain their mutiny. In floods of stupid tears they will at last recognize that the intention of the one who created them mutineers was undoubtedly to make fun of them. They will say this in despair, and their words will be blasphemy, which will make them even more unhappy, for human nature cannot endure blasphemy and in the end invariably takes revenge for it. Thus, restlessness, confusion and unhappiness – those are the lot of human beings now, after all

that you underwent for the sake of their freedom! Your great prophet says in an allegorical vision that he saw all those who took part in the first resurrection and that of each tribe there were twelve thousand. But if there were so many of them, they cannot have been human beings, but gods. They had borne your Cross, they had borne decades in the hungry and barren wilderness, living on roots and locusts – and of course, it goes without saying that you may point with pride to those children of freedom, of a love that is free, of the free and magnificent sacrifice they have made in your name. Remember, however, that there were only a few thousand of them, and those were gods – but what about the rest? And in what way are the other weak human beings to blame for not having been able to bear the same things as the mighty? In what way is the weak soul to blame for not having the strength to accommodate such terrible gifts? And indeed, did you really only come to the chosen ones and for the chosen ones? But if that is so, then there is a mystery there and it is not for us to comprehend it. And if there is a mystery, then we were within our rights to propagate that mystery and teach them that it was not the free decision of their hearts and not love that mattered, but the mystery, which they must obey blindly, even in opposition to their consciences. And that was what we did. We corrected your great deed and founded it upon *miracle, mystery* and *authority*. And people were glad that they had once been brought together into a flock and that at last from their hearts had been removed such a terrible gift, which had brought them so much torment. Were we right, to teach and act thus, would you say? Did we not love mankind, when we so humbly admitted his helplessness, lightening his burden with love and allowing his feeble nature even sin, but with our permission? Why have you come to get in our way now? And why do you gaze at me so silently and sincerely with those meek eyes of yours? Why do you not get angry? I do not want your love, because I myself do not love you. And what is there I can conceal from you? Do you think I don't know who I'm talking to? What I have to say to you is all familiar to you already, I can read it in your eyes. And do you think I would conceal our secret from you? Perhaps it is my own lips that you want to hear it from – then listen: we are not with you, but with *him*, there is our secret! We have long been not with you, but with *him*, eight centuries now. It is now just eight centuries since we took from him that which you in indignation rejected, that final gift he

offered you, when he showed you all the kingdoms of the world: we took from him Rome and the sword of Caesar and announced that we alone were the kings of the world, the only kings, even though to this day we have not succeeded in bringing our task to its complete fulfilment. But whose is the blame for that? Oh, this task is as yet only at its beginning, but it has begun. The world will have to wait for its accomplishment for a long time yet, and it will have to suffer much, but we shall reach our goal and shall be Caesars and then we shall give thought to the universal happiness of human beings. And yet even back then you could have taken the sword of Caesar. Why did you reject that final gift? Had you accepted that third counsel of the mighty Spirit, you would have supplied everything that man seeks in the world, that is: someone to bow down before, someone to entrust one's conscience to, and a way of at last uniting everyone into an undisputed, general and consensual ant-heap, for the need of universal union is the third and final torment of human beings. Invariably mankind as a whole has striven to organize itself on a universal basis. Many great peoples have there been, and peoples with great histories, but the loftier those peoples, the more unhappy, for more acutely than others have they been conscious of the need for a universal union of human beings. The great conquerors, the Tamburlaines and Genghis Khans, hurtled like a whirlwind through the world, striving to conquer the universe, but even they, though they did so unconsciously, expressed the same great need of mankind for universal and general union. Had you accepted the world and the purple of Caesar, you would have founded a universal kingdom and given men universal peace. For who shall reign over human beings if not those who reign over their consciences and in whose hands are their loaves? Well, we took the sword of Caesar, and, of course, in taking it rejected you and followed *him*. Oh, centuries yet will pass of the excesses of the free intellect, of their science and anthropophagy, because, having begun to erect their Tower of Babel without us, they will end in anthropophagy. But then the beast will come crawling to our feet and lick them and sprinkle them with the bloody tears from his eyes. And we will sit upon the beast and raise the cup, and on it will be written: MYSTERY! But then and only then for human beings will begin the kingdom of peace and happiness. You are proud of your chosen ones, but all you have are chosen ones, and we shall bring rest to all. And there is more: how many of

those chosen ones, of the mighty, who might have become chosen ones, at last grew tired of waiting for you, and have transferred and will yet transfer the energies of their spirits and the fervour of their hearts to a different sphere and end by raising their *free* banner against you. But it was you yourself who raised that banner. In our hands, though, everyone will be happy and will neither mutiny nor destroy one another any more, as they do in your freedom, wherever one turns. Oh, we shall persuade them that they will only become free when they renounce their freedom for us and submit to us. And what does it matter whether we are right or whether we are telling a lie? They themselves will be persuaded we are right, for they will remember to what horrors of slavery and confusion your freedom has brought them. Freedom, the free intellect and science will lead them into such labyrinths and bring them up against such miracles and unfathomable mysteries that some of them, the disobedient and ferocious ones, will destroy themselves; others, disobedient and feeble, will destroy one another, while a third group, those who are left, the feeble and unhappy ones, will come crawling to our feet, and will cry out to us: 'Yes, you were right, you alone were masters of his secret, and we are returning to you, save us from ourselves.' Receiving loaves from us, of course, they will clearly see that what we have done is to take from them the loaves they won with their own hands in order to distribute it to them without any miracles, they will see that we have not turned stones into loaves, but truly, more than of the bread, they will be glad of the fact that they are receiving it from our hands! For they will be only too aware that in former times, when we were not there, the very loaves they won used merely to turn to stones in their hands, and yet now they have returned to us those very same stones have turned back to loaves again. All too well, all too well will they appreciate what it means to subordinate themselves to us once and for all! And until human beings understand that, they will be unhappy. Who contributed most of all to that lack of understanding, tell me? Who split up the flock and scattered it over the unknown ways? But the flock will once more gather and once more submit and this time it will be for ever. Then we shall give them a quiet, reconciled happiness, the happiness of feeble creatures, such as they were created. Oh, we shall persuade them at last not to be proud, for you bore them up and by doing so taught them to be proud; we shall prove to them that they are feeble, that

they are merely pathetic children, but that childish happiness is sweeter than all others. They will grow fearful and look at us and press themselves to us in their fear, like nestlings to their mother. They will marvel at us and regard us with awe and be proud that we are so powerful and so clever as to be able to pacify such a turbulent, thousand-million-headed flock. They will feebly tremble with fright before our wrath, their minds will grow timid, their eyes will brim with tears, like those of women and children, but just as lightly at a nod from us will they pass over into cheerfulness and laughter, radiant joy and happy children's songs. Yes, we shall make them work, but in their hours of freedom from work we shall arrange their lives like a childish game, with childish songs, in chorus, with innocent dances. Oh, we shall permit them sin, too, they are weak and powerless, and they will love us like children for letting them sin. We shall tell them that every sin can be redeemed as long as it is committed with our leave; we are allowing them to sin because we love them, and as for the punishment for those sins, very well, we shall take it upon ourselves. And we shall take it upon ourselves, and they will worship us as benefactors who have assumed responsibility for their sins before God. And they shall have no secrets from us. We shall permit them or forbid them to live with their wives or paramours, to have or not to have children – all according to the degree of their obedience – and they will submit to us with cheerfulness and joy. The most agonizing secrets of their consciences – all, all will they bring to us, and we shall resolve it all, and they will attend our decision with joy, because it will deliver them from the great anxiety and fearsome present torments of free and individual decision. And all will be happy, all the millions of beings, except for the hundred thousand who govern them. For only we, we, who preserve the mystery, only we shall be unhappy. There will be thousands upon millions of happy babes, and a hundred thousand martyrs who have taken upon themselves the curse of the knowledge of good and evil. Quietly they will die, quietly they will fade away in your name and beyond the tomb will find only death. But we shall preserve the secret and for the sake of their happiness will lure them with a heavenly and eternal reward. For if there were anything in the other world, it goes without saying that it would not be for the likes of them. It is said and prophesied that you will come and prevail anew, will come with your chosen, your proud and mighty ones, but we will say that they have saved

only themselves, while we have saved all. It is said that the whore who sits on the beast holding her MYSTERY will be disgraced, that the weak will rise up in mutiny again, that they will tear her purple and render naked her 'desolate' body. But then I shall arise and draw your attention to the thousands upon millions of happy babes, who know not sin. And we, who for the sake of their happiness have taken their sins upon us, we shall stand before you and say: 'Judge us if you can and dare.' You may as well know that I am not afraid of you. You may as well know that I too was in the wilderness, that I too nourished myself on roots and locusts, that I too blessed the freedom with which you have blessed human beings, I too prepared myself to join the number of your chosen ones, the number of the strong and the mighty, with a yearning to 'fulfil the number'. But I came to my senses again and was unwilling to serve madness. I returned and adhered to the crowd of those who have *corrected your great deed*. I left the proud and returned to the humble for the sake of their happiness. What I say to you will come to pass, and our kingdom shall be accomplished. I tell you again: tomorrow you will see that obedient flock, which at the first nod of my head will rush to rake up the hot embers to the bonfire on which I am going to burn you for having come to get in our way. For if there ever was one who deserved our bonfire more than anyone else, it is you. Tomorrow I am going to burn you. *Dixi.*" '

Ivan paused. He had grown flushed from talking, and talking with passion; now that he had stopped, however, he suddenly smiled.

Alyosha, who had listened to him all this time without saying anything, though towards the end, in a state of extreme agitation, he had several times attempted to interrupt the flow of his brother's speech, but had evidently held himself in check, suddenly began to speak as though he had leapt into motion.

'But... that is preposterous!' he exclaimed, turning red. 'Your poem is a eulogy of Jesus, not a vilification of him, as you intended it. And who will listen to you on the subject of freedom? That is a fine way, a fine way to understand it! That is not how it's understood in the Orthodox faith. That's Rome, and not even Rome completely, either, that isn't true – it's the worst elements in Catholicism, the inquisitors, the Jesuits!... And in any case, a fantastic character like your Inquisitor could not possibly have existed. What are these sins of human beings that have been taken

by others upon themselves? Who are these bearers of mystery who have taken upon themselves some kind of curse for the sake of human happiness? Whoever heard of such people? We know the Jesuits, bad things are said of them, but they're not as they appear in your poem, are they? They're not at all like that, in no way like that... They are simply a Roman army for a future universal earthly kingdom, with an emperor – the Pontiff of Rome – at their head... That is their ideal, but without any mysteries or exalted melancholy... The most straightforward desire for power, for sordid earthly blessings, for enslavement... like a future law of self-ownership, with themselves as the owners... that's all they care about. Why, they probably don't even believe in God. Your suffering Inquisitor is only a fantasy...'

'Hold on, hold on,' Ivan said, laughing. 'What a temper you're in. A fantasy, you say – very well! All right, it's a fantasy. But wait a moment: do you really suppose that the whole of that Catholic movement of recent centuries is nothing but a desire for power in order to attain earthly comfort? That wouldn't be something Father Paisy taught you, would it?'

'No, no, on the contrary, Father Paisy did actually once say something that was slightly similar to your idea... but of course it wasn't the same, not the same at all,' Alyosha suddenly remembered.

'A valuable piece of information, nevertheless, in spite of your "not the same at all". The question I want to ask you is why have your Jesuits and inquisitors joined together for the sole purpose of attaining wretched material comfort? Why may there not be among them a single martyr, tormented by a great *Weltschmerz* and loving mankind? Look: suppose that out of all those who desire nothing but sordid material comfort there is just one – just one, like my aged Inquisitor – who has himself eaten roots in the wilderness and raged like one possessed as he conquered his flesh in order to make himself free and perfect, though all his life he has loved mankind and has suddenly had his eyes opened and seen that there is not much moral beatitude in attaining perfect freedom if at the same time one is convinced that millions of the rest of God's creatures have been stitched together as a mere bad joke, that they will never have the strength to cope with their freedom, that from pathetic mutineers there will never grow giants to complete the building of the Tower, that not for such geese did the great idealist dream of

his harmony. Having understood all that, he returned and joined forces with... the clever people. Could that really not happen?"

"A fine lot of people he joined! How can one call them clever?" Alyosha exclaimed, almost reckless in his passion. "They have no intelligence, nor do they have any mysteries or secrets... Except perhaps atheism – that is their only secret. Your Inquisitor doesn't believe in God, that's his whole secret!"

"So what if even that is true? At last you've realized it! And indeed it is true, that is indeed the only secret, but is that not suffering, even for a man such as he, who has wasted his entire life on a heroic feat in the wilderness, and has not been cured of his love for mankind? In the decline of his days he becomes clearly persuaded that only the counsel of the terrible Spirit could in any way reconstitute in tolerable order the feeble mutineers, "imperfect, trial creatures, who were created as a bad joke". And lo, persuaded of this, he sees that it is necessary to proceed according to the indication of the clever Spirit, the terrible Spirit of death and destruction, and to such end accept deceit and falsehood and lead people consciously to death and destruction and deceive them moreover all of the way, so that they do not notice whither they are being led, so that at least on the way those pathetic blind creatures shall believe themselves happy. And note that it is deceit in the name of the One in whose ideal the old man had all his life so passionately believed! Is that not a misfortune? And even if there were only one such man at the head of this entire army, "thirsting for power for the sake of mere sordid earthly blessings", then would not one such man be enough to produce a tragedy? Not only that: one such man, standing at their head, would be enough in order to establish at last the whole guiding idea of the Roman cause with all its armies and Jesuits, the loftiest idea of that cause. I declare to you outright that I firmly believe that these unique men have never been hard to find among those who stand at the head of the movement. Who can say – perhaps there have been such unique men even among the Roman pontiffs? Who can say – perhaps that accursed old man who loved mankind with such a stubborn, original love exists even now in the form of a whole crowd of such unique old men and not by mere accident but as a secret alliance, formed long ago for the preservation of the mystery, for its preservation from feeble and unhappy human beings, in order to make them happy. That is certainly the case, and must be so. I

fancy that even among the Masons there is something of the same sort of mystery at the basis of their movement and that the Catholics hate the Freemasons so much because they see them as rivals, a division of the unity of the idea, while there must be one flock and one shepherd... As a matter of fact, in defending my thesis like this, I feel like an author who is unable to withstand your criticism. Enough of this.'

'I think you are a Freemason yourself!' Alyosha suddenly let out. 'You don't believe in God,' he added, this time with extreme sorrow. It seemed to him, moreover, that his brother was gazing at him with mockery. 'How does your poem end?' he asked suddenly, looking at the ground. 'Or have we already had the end?'

'I was going to end it like this: when the Inquisitor falls silent, he waits for a certain amount of time to hear what his Captive will say in response. He finds His silence difficult to bear. He has seen that the Prisoner has listened to him all this time with quiet emotion, gazing straight into his eyes and evidently not wishing to raise any objection. The old man would like the Other to say something to him, even if it is bitter, terrible. But He suddenly draws near to the old man without saying anything and quietly kisses him on his bloodless, ninety-year-old lips. That is His only response. The old man shudders. Something has stirred at the corners of his mouth; he goes to the door, opens it and says to Him: "Go and do not come back... do not come back at all... ever... ever!" And he releases him into "the town's dark streets and squares". The Captive departs.'

'And the old man?'

'The kiss burns within his heart, but the old man remains with his former idea.'

'And you along with him, you too?' Alyosha exclaimed sadly. Ivan laughed.

'Oh, Alyosha, why, you know, it's nonsense – it's just an incoherent *poema* by an incoherent student who has never so much as put two lines of verse to paper. Why are you taking it so seriously? Surely you don't think that now I shall go straight there, to the Jesuits, in order to join the crowd of people who are correcting His great deed? Oh Lord, what do I care about that? I mean, I told you, all I want to do is to hold out until I'm thirty, and then – dash the cup to the floor!'

'And the sticky leaf-buds, and the beloved tombs, and the blue

sky, and the woman you love? How are you going to live, what are you going to love them with?' Alyosha exclaimed sadly. 'With a hell like that in your breast and your head, is it possible? No, of course you're going to join them... and if you don't, you'll kill yourself, you won't be able to endure!'

'There is a power that can endure everything!' Ivan said, with a cold, ironic smile now.

'What power?'

'The Karamazovian power... the power of Karamazovian baseness.'

'You mean, to drown in depravity, to crush the life from your soul in corruption, is that it, is that it?'

'Possibly that too... Only perhaps when I'm thirty, I shall escape, and then...'

'But how will you escape? With what means will you escape? With your ideas it's impossible.'

'Again, the Karamazovian way.'

'So that "all things are lawful"? All things are lawful, is that what you mean, is that it?'

Ivan frowned and suddenly turned strangely pale.

'Ah, you've got hold of the little remark I made yesterday at which Miusov took such offence... and which brother Dmitry was so naïve as to butt in and repeat?' he said, smiling a crooked smile. 'Yes, perhaps: "all things are lawful", since the remark has been made. I do not disown it. And dear Mitya's version of it is not so bad, either.'

Alyosha stared at him without saying anything.

'In leaving, brother, I had imagined that in all the world I have only you,' Ivan said suddenly, with unexpected emotion, 'but now I see that in your heart there is no room for me, my dear hermit. I do not disown the formula "all things are lawful", but, I mean, are you going to disown me because of it – eh? eh?'

Alyosha rose, walked over to him, and without saying anything kissed him quietly on the lips.

'Literary thieving!' Ivan exclaimed, suddenly passing into a kind of ecstasy. 'You stole that from my *poema*! But never mind, I thank you. Come on, Alyosha, let us go, it is time both for you and for me.'

They went outside, but paused by the entrance to the inn.

'Look, Alyosha,' Ivan pronounced in a resolute voice. 'If I am

indeed capable of loving the sticky leaf-buds, then I shall love them at the mere memory of you. It is enough for me that you are somewhere here, and I shan't yet lose my will to live. Is that enough for you? If you like, you may take it as a confession of love. But now you must go to the right, and I to the left – and enough, do you hear, enough. That is to say that if it proves that I do not leave tomorrow (though it seems to me that I most certainly shall) and we were again to meet somehow, then I want you not to say another word to me on all these subjects. I earnestly request you. And concerning brother Dmitry I also particularly request that you not even so much as mention him to me ever again,' he added in sudden irritation. 'It's all settled and decided, isn't it? And in exchange for that, I for my part will also give you a certain promise: when I attain the age of thirty and want to "dash the cup to the floor" then, wherever you are, I shall come once again to discuss things with you... even if it's from America, I shall have you know. I shall come specially. It will be very interesting to set eyes on you at that time: what will you be like? You see, it's quite a solemn sort of promise. And indeed it may well be that we are saying goodbye for seven, for ten years. Well, go to your *Pater Seraphicus* now, after all, he is dying; if he dies in your absence you may well be angry at me for having kept you back. Goodbye, kiss me once more – like that – andgo...'

Ivan suddenly turned and went his way, without looking round this time. It resembled the manner in which brother Dmitry had left Alyosha the day before, though then the mood had been quite different. This strange little observation flashed, like an arrow, through Alyosha's sad mind, sad and sorrowful at that moment. He waited for a bit as he watched his brother go. For some reason he suddenly noticed that brother Ivan walked with a kind of sway and that, seen from behind, his right shoulder looked lower than his left. Never had he observed this previously. Suddenly, however, he also turned and set off almost at a run in the direction of the monastery. It was by now getting very dark, and he felt a sense that was almost one of fear; something new was growing within him, something he was unable to account for. The wind rose again, as it had done yesterday, and the ancient pine trees soughed darkly around him as he entered the hermitage woods. He was almost running. '*Pater Seraphicus*' – that name, he had taken it from somewhere – where? – flashed through Alyosha's brain. 'Ivan, poor

Ivan, and when will I see you again... Here is the hermitage, O Lord! Yes, yes, it is him, it is *Pater Seraphicus*, he will save me... from him and for ever!’

Later on, several times in his life, he recollected that moment with great bewilderment, wondering how he could suddenly, having only just parted with Ivan, so completely forget his brother Dmitry, who that morning, only a few hours ago, he had determined to track down, vowing not to return without having done so, even if it meant he could not go back to the monastery that night.

Selections from The House of the Dead

Our prison stood at the edge of the fortress, right next to the ramparts. You would sometimes take a look at God's world through the cracks in the fence: surely there must be something to be seen? – and all you would see would be a corner of sky and the high earthen ramparts, overgrown with weeds, and on the ramparts the sentries pacing up and down, day and night; and then you would think that whole years would go by, and you would still come to look through the cracks in the fence and would see the same ramparts, the same sentries and the same little corner of sky, not the sky that stood above the prison, but another, distant and free. Imagine a large courtyard, two hundred yards long and a hundred and fifty yards wide, completely enclosed all round by a high stockade in the form of an irregular hexagon, that is a fence of high posts (pales), driven vertically deep into the earth, wedged closely against one another in ribs, strengthened by cross-planks and sharpened on top: this was the outer enclosure of the prison. In one of the sides of the enclosure a sturdily constructed gate was set; this was always kept closed and was guarded by sentries at every hour of the day and night; it was opened on demand, in order to let men out to work. Beyond the gate was the bright world of freedom where people lived like everyone else. But to those on this side of the enclosure that world seemed like some unattainable fairyland. Here was our own world, unlike anything else; here were our own laws, our own dress, our own manners and customs, here was the house of the living dead, a life like none other upon earth, and people who were special, set apart. It is this special corner that I am setting out to describe.

As you enter the enclosure, you see several buildings inside it. On both sides of a broad inner courtyard stretch two long, single-

storeyed buildings with wooden frames. These are the barracks. Here the convicts live, quartered according to the categories they belong to. Then, in the interior of the enclosure, there is another similar wooden-framed building: this is the kitchen, divided into two artels; further on there is another structure where cellars, granaries and storage sheds of various kinds are housed under one roof. The middle of the courtyard is empty and consists of a fairly large level parade ground. Here the convicts are formed into line, head-counts and roll-calls take place in the morning, at noon and in the evening, and sometimes at several other times of the day as well, depending on how suspicious the guards are and how quickly they can count. All around, between the buildings and the fence, a fairly large space is left. Here, along the rear of the buildings, some of the prisoners, the most unsociable and gloomy ones, like to walk in their non-working hours, concealed from the eyes of everyone, and think their own private thoughts. Meeting them in the course of these walks, I used to like to look into their sullen, branded faces and try to guess what they were thinking about. There was one convict whose favourite occupation in his free time was counting the pales of the fence. Of these there were about one and a half thousand, and he knew each of them individually, had counted each one. Each pale signified a day for him; every day he marked off one of them and in this way, from the number of pales that still remained to be counted, he could see how many days he still had to serve in the prison before his term of hard labour was up. He was sincerely glad whenever he finished a side of the hexagon. He had many years still to wait; but in prison there was time in which to learn patience. I once saw a convict who had been in prison for twenty years and was at last going out into freedom saying farewell to his companions. There were those who could remember when he had first entered the prison, young, carefree, never having given a thought either to his crime or to the punishment he had received. He was leaving prison a grey-haired old man, with a face that was sad and morose. He went the rounds of all six of our barracks in silence. As he entered each one, he prayed to the icons and then bowed to his companions deeply, from the waist, asking them to remember him with kindness. I also remember how a convict who had been a well-to-do Siberian peasant was summoned to the gate one evening. Six months earlier he had been given the news that his former wife had remarried, and he had been violently affected with

grief. Now she herself had come to the prison, had asked to see him and had given him alms. They spoke together for a couple of minutes, both shed a few tears, and then took leave of one another forever. I saw his face when he returned to the barracks... Yes, in this place you could learn patience.

When it got dark we were all taken back to the barracks, where we were locked up for the whole night. I always found it hard to come into our barrack from outside. It was a long, low unventilated room, dimly lit by tallow candles, with a heavy suffocating smell. I do not understand now how I managed to live in it for ten years. I had three boards of the plank bed to sleep on: that was all the space I had that was mine. On this plank bed some thirty men slept in our room alone. In winter the door was locked early; there were some four hours to wait before everyone was asleep. And until then there were noise, uproar, laughter, swearing, the sound of chains, soot and fumes, shaven heads, branded faces, ragged clothes, all that is accursed and dishonoured... yes, man has great endurance! Man is a creature that can get used to anything, and I think that is the best definition of him.

In our prison there were about two hundred and fifty men – this figure was more or less constant. Some arrived, others finished their sentences and left, others died. And what a variety of men there was! I think that each province, each zone of Russia had its representative here. There were non-Russians as well, there were even some convicts from among the mountain tribesmen of the Caucasus. They were all divided according to the degree of their crime and consequently according to the number of years their sentence carried. I suppose there was no crime that did not have its representative here. The basic constituent of the prison population was civilian-category convict deportees (*ssyl'nokatorzhnyye*, or *sil'nokatorzhnyye* – 'heavily punished convicts' – as the men themselves, mispronounced it in all innocence). These were criminals who had been completely deprived of all the rights of their status, pieces cut from society, with faces that had been branded in eternal witness to their expulsion from it. They were sentenced to hard labour for terms of from eight to twelve years and were then sent to live as settlers here and there throughout the regions of Siberia. There were also criminals of the military category; as is the custom in Russian military convict battalions, they were not deprived of the rights of their status. They were given

short sentences; on the completion of these they were sent back where they had come from, to serve as soldiers in the Siberian line battalions. Many of them returned to prison almost immediately, after committing a second, serious offence, and this time their sentence would not be short, but one of twenty years. This category was known as 'habitual'. But the 'habituals' were still not completely deprived of all the rights of their status. Finally, there was one more category, a fairly numerous one, made up of the most serious criminals, soldiers for the most part. It was called the 'special category'. Criminals were sent here from all over Russia. They considered themselves prisoners for life and did not know the length of their sentences. By law they had to perform two or three times the normal number of prison duties. They were being kept in the prison pending the opening in Siberia of projects involving the heaviest penal labour. 'You're doing time, but we're in for life,' they used to say to the other inmates. I have heard that this category has since been abolished. What is more, the civilian category in our prison has also been abolished, and one general military convict battalion has been instituted. Of course, the prison authorities were also changed when these innovations were brought about. So I am describing bygone days, things that belong long ago in the past...

This all happened long ago; it all seems to me like a dream now. I remember my arrival in the prison. It was in the evening, in December. It was already getting dark; men were returning from work; they were getting ready for roll-call. At length a mustachioed NCO opened the door for me into this strange house in which I was to spend so many years, to endure sensations of which I could not have had even an approximate conception, had I not experienced them in actuality. For example, I could never have conceived how terrible and agonizing it would be not once, not even for one minute of all the ten years of my imprisonment, to be alone. At work to be constantly under guard, in the barracks to be with two hundred other convicts and not once, never once to be alone! None the less, I had to get used to this, too, whether I liked it or not.

Here there were men who had committed unpremeditated murder and those for whom it was a profession; here too there were brigands and brigand chiefs. There were petty thieves and vagrants who had been convicted of burglary with breaking and entering. There were also those about whom it was difficult to decide why they had been sent here. All the same, each of them had his own

story to tell, as vague and crushing as the hangover that follows a bout of heavy drinking. In general, they did not talk much about the past, did not like telling their stories, and evidently tried not to think about what lay behind them. I even knew murderers among them who were so cheerful, so completely lacking in concern about what they had done, that one could safely bet their consciences never bothered them. But there were also gloomy ones, who practically never said a word. In general it was rare for anyone to tell the story of his life, and curiosity was unfashionable, somehow not the done thing, not the custom. Perhaps on rare occasions someone might start talking out of idleness, and someone else would listen to him in gloom and indifference. No one could say anything that was a surprise here. 'We know how to read and write,' they would often say with a kind of strange satisfaction. I remember that once a brigand who was drunk (it was sometimes possible to get drunk in prison) began to describe how he had knifed to death a five-year-old boy, first enticing him with a toy, then taking him to an empty shed somewhere and murdering him. The whole barrack of convicts, who up till now had been laughing at his jokes, cried out as one man, and the brigand was compelled to be silent; the men had cried out not from indignation, but because you were *not allowed* to talk *about this kind of thing*, because it was *not done* to talk *about this kind of thing*. I will observe in passing that these men really did 'know how to read and write', and this not in any figurative sense but in a quite literal one. It is probable that over half of them were literate. In what other place where ordinary Russians are gathered together in large numbers would you be able to find a group of two hundred and fifty men, half of whom could read and write? I have since heard that someone has deduced from similar evidence that literacy is harmful to the common people. This is a mistake: causes of quite another kind are involved here, although it cannot be denied that literacy does develop the common people's self-sufficiency. But this is surely not a fault. Each category of convicts was distinguished by the clothes it wore: the jackets of some were half dark brown and half grey, as were their trousers – one leg grey, the other dark brown. Once, at work, a girl selling kalatches came up to the convicts, looked at me for a long time and then suddenly burst out laughing. 'Well, isn't that the limit,' she cried. 'There wasn't enough grey cloth to go round, and there wasn't enough of the black stuff

neither.' There were also those whose jackets were all of grey cloth, with only the sleeves made of dark brown. The convicts' heads were also shaven in different ways: some had half their heads shaven lengthwise along their skulls, while others had them shaven crosswise.

You could discern at first glance one single glaring characteristic that was common to all this strange family: even the strongest, most original personalities who dominated the others without trying, even they attempted to fit in with the general tone of the prison. Generally speaking, all these men – with the exception of a few indefatigably cheerful souls whose good humour made them the object of general scorn – were sullen, curious, terribly vain, boastful, quick to take offence and preoccupied in the highest degree with good form. The ability not to be surprised by anything was considered the greatest virtue. They were all madly obsessed with the question of outward behaviour. But quite often the most arrogant manner would be replaced with the swiftness of lightning by the most craven one. There were a few genuinely strong individuals; they were straightforward and did not give themselves airs. But it was strange: some of these truly strong characters were vain to the utmost degree, almost to the point of insanity. In general vanity and outward appearance were what mattered first and foremost. The majority of these men were depraved and hopelessly corrupt. The scandals and gossip never ceased: this was a hell, a dark night of the soul. But no one dared to rebel against the endogenous and accepted rules of the prison; everyone submitted to them. There were violently unusual characters who submitted with difficulty and effort, but submit they did, nevertheless. To the prison came men who had gone too far, had overstepped the limit when they had been free, so that in the end it was as if their crimes had not been committed by them personally, as if they had committed them without knowing why, as if in some fever or daze; often out of vanity, raised in them to an extraordinary degree. But in our prison they were soon brought to heel, in spite of the fact that some of them, before they came here, had been the terror of whole villages and towns. Looking around him, the new convict soon realized that he had come to the wrong place: that there was no one here whom he could surprise, and imperceptibly he grew resigned and fitted in with the general tone. This general tone outwardly consisted of a certain special, personal

dignity with which almost every inmate of the prison was imbued. As if the status of convict, of one on whom sentence has been passed, was a kind of rank, and an honourable one at that. Not a trace of shame or repentance! Yet there was, too, a kind of outward resignation, as it were an official one, a kind of calm reasoning: 'We're lost men,' they would say. 'We didn't know how to live our lives in freedom, so now we have to walk the green street and stand in line to be counted.' – 'We wouldn't listen to our fathers and mothers, so now we must listen to the skin of the drum instead.' – 'We didn't want to sew gold thread, so now we must break stones instead.' All this was said frequently, both in the form of moral exhortation and in the form of everyday proverbs and sayings, but never seriously. It was all just words. Hardly one of these men inwardly admitted his own lawlessness. If anyone who was not a convict tried to reproach one of them for his crime, berating him (although it is not in the Russian spirit to reproach a criminal), there would be no end to the oaths that would follow. And what masters of the oath they all were! They swore with finesse, with artistic skill. They had made a science of swearing; they tried to gain the upper hand not so much by means of the offensive word as they did through the offensive meaning, spirit, idea – and this in the most refined and venomous manner. Their constant quarrels developed this science among them even further. All these men worked under the threat of the stick, and were consequently idle and depraved: if they had not been depraved before they came to the prison, they became so here. They had all been gathered together here against their wills; they were all strangers to one another.

'The devil's worn out three pairs of shoes in order to get us all into one bunch,' they would say of themselves; and so it was that scandals, intrigues, old-womanish slander, envy, quarrelling and malice were always to the fore in this burdensome, desperate life. No old woman would have been capable of being so old-womanish as some of these murderers were. I repeat, there were strong men among them, characters who all their lives had been used to charging at obstacles and giving orders, who were hardened and fearless. These men were automatically respected; they, for their part, although very jealous of their reputations, tried in general not to be a burden to others, avoided getting involved in empty exchanges of curses, comported themselves with unusual dignity,

were reasonable and nearly always obeyed the authorities – not out of any principle of obedience, not out of a consciousness of duty, but as if they had some kind of a contract, and recognized its mutual advantages. None the less, these men were treated with caution. I remember how one of these convicts, a man of fearless and determined character, well-known to the authorities for his brutal tendencies, was once summoned to be flogged for some misdemeanour. It was a summer day, work was over. The field-officer, who was in immediate and direct control of the prison, came in person to the guardhouse, which was right by our gate, in order to witness the punishment. This Major was a kind of fatal presence for the convicts; he could reduce them to a state of trembling. He was severe to the point of insanity, ‘pounced on folk’, as the convicts said. Most of all they feared his penetrating, lynx-like stare, from which nothing could be concealed. He could somehow see without looking. When he came into the prison he already knew what was happening at its far end. The prisoners called him ‘Eight-Eyes’. His system was a mistaken one. By his acts of vicious fury he only increased the bitterness of men who were already bitter, and had there not been stationed above him a superintendent, a man of nobility and reason, who sometimes moderated his wild excesses, he would have caused much trouble by his method of administration. I cannot understand why he did not come to a bad end; he passed into retirement well and in good spirits, although he did have to face court proceedings.

The prisoner turned pale when his name was called. Usually he lay down under the birch in silent determination, endured his punishment without a word and got to his feet again afterwards as fresh as ever, looking coolly and philosophically at the misfortune that had overtaken him. He was none the less always treated with caution. But on this occasion he considered himself for some reason to be in the right. He turned pale, and in secret from the guards managed to shove a sharp English cobblers’ knife up his sleeve. Knives, and all other sharp instruments, were strictly forbidden in the prison. Searches were frequent, unexpected and no joking matter, punishments were severe; but since it is difficult to find something on a thief’s person when he is particularly determined to hide it, and since knives and sharp instruments were a continuous necessity in the prison, they never disappeared entirely. Even if they were confiscated, new ones immediately took their place. The

entire prison rushed to the fence and looked through the cracks with hearts that beat violently. Everyone knew that this time Petrov would refuse to lie down and be flogged, and that the Major was done for. But at the most decisive moment our Major got into his droshky and drove away, entrusting the execution of the punishment to another officer. 'God has spared him!' the convicts said afterwards. As far as Petrov was concerned, he endured his punishment with the greatest of calm. His anger evaporated with the Major's departure. A convict is obedient and submissive to a certain degree; but there is a limit beyond which one should not go. Incidentally, there is no phenomenon more curious than these strange outbursts of impatience and obstinacy. Often a man will suffer in patience for several years, resign himself, endure the most savage punishments, and then suddenly erupt over some trifle, some piece of nonsense, almost over nothing at all. In one view, he may be termed insane; and is indeed considered so by many.

I have already said that for a period of several years I saw among these people not the slightest trace of repentance, not one sign that their crime weighed heavily on their conscience, and that the majority of them consider themselves to be completely in the right. This is a fact. Of course, vanity, bad examples, foolhardiness and false shame are the causes of much of it. On the other hand, who can say that he has fathomed the depths of these lost hearts and has read in them that which is hidden from the whole world? It must surely have been possible over so many years to have noticed something, to have caught at least some feature of these hearts that bore witness to an inner anguish, to suffering. But this was absent, quite definitely absent. Yet, it seems that crime cannot be comprehended from points of view that are already given, and that its philosophy is rather more difficult than is commonly supposed. Of course prisons and the system of forced labour do not reform the criminal; they only punish him and secure society against further encroachments on its tranquillity. In the criminal, prison and the most intense penal labour serve only to develop hatred, a thirst for forbidden pleasures and a terrible flippancy. But I am firmly convinced that the famous system of solitary confinement achieves only a spurious, deceptive, external goal. It sucks the vital sap from a man, enervates his soul, weakens it, intimidates it and then presents the withered mummy, the semi-lunatic as a model of reform and repentance. Of course the criminal, who has rebelled

against society, hates it and nearly always considers himself to be in the right and it to be in the wrong. What is more, he has already suffered its punishment, and he nearly always considers that this has cleansed him and settled his account. It may be concluded from this point of view that right is indeed on the side of the criminal. But, leaving aside all partial positions, everyone will agree that there are crimes which, ever since the world began, always and everywhere, under all legal systems, have been indisputably considered as crimes, and will be considered so for as long as man is man. Only in prison have I heard stories of the most terrible, the most unnatural actions, the most monstrous slayings, told with the most irrepressible, the most childish merry laughter. One man who had murdered his father stays particularly in my memory. He was of noble origin, had worked in government service and had been something of a prodigal son to his sixty-year-old father. His behaviour had been thoroughly dissipated, he had become embroiled in debt. His father had tried to exert a restraining influence on him, had tried to make him see reason; but the father had a house and a farm, it was suspected he had money, and – his son murdered him in order to get his hands on the inheritance. The crime was not discovered until a month later. The murderer had himself informed the police that his father had disappeared. He spent the whole of this month in the utmost debauchery. Finally, in his absence, the police discovered the body. In the farmyard, along the whole of its length, was a ditch for the draining of sewage, covered with planks. The body was found in this ditch. It was dressed and neatly arranged, the grey-haired head had been cut off and laid against the torso; under the head the murderer had placed a pillow. He had made no confession; had been stripped of his nobility and government service rank, and had been sentenced to twenty years' deportation and penal servitude. All the time I lived alongside him he was in the most excellent and cheerful frame of mind. He was an unbalanced, flippant man, unreasoning in the extreme, though by no means stupid. I never observed any particular signs of cruelty in him. The prisoners despised him, not for his crime, of which no mention was ever made, but for his silliness, for not knowing how to behave. Sometimes, in conversation, he would mention his father. Once, when he was talking to me about the healthy constitution that was hereditary in his family, he added: *'My parent never complained of any illness to*

the end of his days.' Such brutal lack of feeling is, of course, outrageous. It is a unique phenomenon; here there is some constitutional defect, some physical and moral abnormality which science has not yet been able to explain, not simply a question of crime. It goes without saying that at first I did not believe he had committed this crime. But men from his town, who must have known all the details of his story, told me about the whole case. The facts were so clear that it was impossible not to believe them.

The convicts once heard him crying out at night in his sleep: 'Hold him, hold him! His head, cut off his head, his head!'

Nearly all the convicts talked and raved in their sleep at night. Oaths, underworld slang, knives and axes figured most prominently in their ravings. 'We're beaten men,' they used to say, 'we've had the insides beaten out of us, that's why we cry out at night.'

The forced public labour that took place in the fortress was not an occupation but an obligation: a convict completed his assignment or worked fixed hours and then went back to the prison. The work was looked upon with hatred. Without his own, private task, to which he was devoted with all his mind and all his care, a man could not live in prison. And how indeed could all those men, who were intelligent, had lived intensely and wanted to live, had been brought forcibly together here in one herd, forcibly uprooted from society and normal life, how could they have led a normal and regular life here of their own free will? Idleness alone would have developed in them criminal tendencies of which they had hitherto had no conception. Without work and without lawful, normal possessions a man cannot live, he grows depraved, turns into an animal. And for this reason every man in the prison had, as a consequence of a natural demand and an instinct for self-preservation, his own craft and occupation. The long summer days were almost entirely filled with prison labour; in the short nights there was hardly enough time to sleep properly. But in winter, according to regulations, the convicts had to be locked into the prison as soon as it started to get dark. What were they to do during the long, tedious hours of the winter evenings? And so in spite of an official ban, almost every barrack was transformed into an enormous workshop. Work itself was not forbidden; but it was strictly forbidden to possess any implements in the prison, and without these work was impossible. But men worked on the sly, and it seemed that in some cases the authorities did not bother to

inquire too closely. Many of the convicts arrived in the prison knowing no trade at all, but they learned from others and subsequently left prison as good craftsmen. Here there were bootmakers, shoemakers, tailors, carpenters, locksmiths, engravers and gilders. There was one Jew, Isay Bumshteyn, a jeweller who was also a moneylender. They all worked away and earned a few copecks. Orders for work were obtained from the town. Money is freedom in the form of coins, and so for a man who has been completely deprived of freedom it is ten times as dear. He is already half consoled by the mere sound of it jingling in his pocket, even though he may not be able to spend it. But money can be spent at any time and in any place, all the more so since forbidden fruit tastes twice as sweet. And it was even possible to get vodka in the prison. Pipes were most strictly forbidden, but all the men smoked them. Money and tobacco saved them from scurvy and other diseases. And work saved them from crime: without work the convicts would have eaten one another like spiders in a glass jar. In spite of this, both work and money were forbidden. Searches were quite often made at night, all forbidden items were confiscated, and no matter how carefully money was hidden, it was none the less sometimes found by the searchers. This is partly why it was not saved up, but soon spent on drink; and this is how there came to be vodka in the prison. After each search the offenders, in addition to being deprived of all their money and equipment, were usually severely flogged or beaten. But after each search the deficiencies were immediately made good, new equipment was brought into the prison and everything continued as before. The authorities were aware of this and the convicts did not complain about their punishment, even though this life they led resembled that of settlers on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius.

Those who did not have a skill made money by other methods. Some of these were quite original. Some men, for example, earned money by doing nothing but buying and selling secondhand goods, and sometimes personal effects were sold which it would never occur to anyone outside the walls of the prison to consider as articles for sale and purchase, or even to consider as articles at all. But the life of penal servitude was one of extreme poverty, and the convicts were men of great commercial resourcefulness. Every last scrap of cloth was prized and was used for some purpose or other. Because of the general poverty, money in the prison also possessed

a value that was quite different from the value it had outside. Long and elaborate toil was remunerated with pennies. Some men practised successfully as money-lenders. Convicts who were too exhausted to work or had run out of money took their last possessions to the moneylender and received from him a few copper coins at an exorbitant rate of interest. If they did not redeem them in time, these possessions would be sold without pity or delay; moneylending was such a flourishing activity that even items of prison property which were subject to inspection were accepted as pledges, things like prison clothing, boots, shoes and the like – things that were necessary to every prisoner at every moment. But pledges like these involved another turn of events, one that was not really surprising: the man who had pledged the goods and received money for them would immediately, without further ado, go to the duty officer who was in immediate control of the prison, and report to him that public property had been pledged; the goods would be immediately confiscated back from the money-lender, without the higher authorities being informed of the matter. It is a curious fact that there were never any quarrels on this account: the moneylender would silently and sullenly hand over whatever he had to and would even make it appear as though he had been expecting something like this to happen all day. Perhaps he could not help admitting to himself that had he been in the borrower's place he would have done the same thing. And so if he sometimes did a bit of cursing after it was all over, it was without any malice, and merely to appease his conscience.

In general the convicts did a fearful amount of stealing from one another. They nearly all had their own locked boxes, in which they kept items of prison issue. This was permitted; but the boxes were no safeguard against theft. I think it may be imagined what skilful thieves we had among us. One prisoner, a man who was sincerely devoted to me (I say this without any exaggeration), stole my Bible, the only book we were permitted to have in the prison; he confessed to me the same day, not because he had repented for what he had done, but because he felt sorry for me when he saw me spend such a long time looking for it. There were men who peddled vodka and quickly grew rich. I will give a more detailed account of this trade elsewhere; it was rather remarkable. In the prison there were many convicts who had been sentenced for smuggling, and so it was not surprising that vodka was brought in, inspections and

guards notwithstanding. Incidentally, smuggling is by its very nature something of a special crime. Can one believe, for example, that money and gain are of only secondary importance to a smuggler? And yet precisely this is the case. The smuggler works passionately, with a sense of vocation. He is something of a poet. He risks everything, faces terrible dangers, employs cunning, inventiveness, gets himself out of scrapes; sometimes he even acts according to some kind of inspiration. This passion is as strong as the passion for cards. In the prison I knew one convict who was outwardly of colossal proportions, but so gentle, quiet and resigned that it was impossible to imagine how he could ever have ended up in prison. He was so lacking in malice, so easy to get along with that during his entire stay in prison he never once quarrelled with anyone. But he came from the western frontier, had been sent to prison for smuggling and had of course not been able to restrain himself, but started to smuggle vodka into the prison. How many times he had been flogged for this, and how he feared the birch! And the trade in illicit vodka brought him only the most meagre returns. The only person who made any profit from the sale was the entrepreneur. The curious fellow loved his art for its own sake. He was as tearful as an old woman, and how many times after he had been flogged did he repent and swear never to smuggle again. He would sometimes master himself courageously for a whole month, but in the end he was always unable to hold out any longer... It was thanks to characters such as him that there was no shortage of vodka in the prison.

Finally, there was one source of income which, although it did not make the convicts rich, was none the less constant and beneficial. This was alms. The upper class of our society has no conception of how our merchants, tradesmen and all our people care for the 'unfortunates'. Their alms are almost continuous and nearly always take the form of bread, bread rolls and kalatches, much less often that of money. Without these gifts, in many places the lives of the convicts, especially those who are awaiting trial and who are kept under a much stricter regime than are those on whom sentence has been passed, would be too hard. The gifts are religiously divided into even shares by the convicts. If there is not enough for everyone the loaves are cut into equal portions, sometimes into as many as six pieces, and each prisoner receives his piece without fail. I remember the first time I was given money. It

was shortly after my arrival in the prison. I was returning from the morning's work alone with the guard. Towards me came a mother and her daughter, a little girl of about ten, as pretty as an angel. I had already seen them once before. The mother had been a soldier's wife and had been made a widow. Her husband, a young soldier, had been under arrest and had died in the convict ward of the hospital while I was ill there. His wife and daughter had come to say goodbye to him; both had cried terribly. When she saw me, the girl blushed and whispered something to her mother who immediately stopped, fished a quarter copeck out of her bag and gave it to her daughter. The little girl came rushing after me... 'Here, "unfortunate", take a copeck in the name of Christ!' she cried, running out ahead of me and pressing the coin into my hand. I took her quarter copeck, and the girl returned to her mother thoroughly satisfied. I kept that quarter copeck for a long time.

First Impressions (1)

The first month and indeed the whole of the early phase of my life in prison come vividly to my mind's eye now. The years of prison that followed are much fainter in my memory. Some of them seem to have withdrawn completely into the background, mingling together, and leaving one undiluted impression of heaviness, monotony and suffocation.

But everything I experienced in the first days of my penal servitude seems to me now as though it had only happened yesterday. And this is the way it is bound to be.

I distinctly remember that, from the first step I took in this life, what struck me was that there seemed to be nothing striking, unusual, or shall I say unexpected about it. All this had seemed to flit before me in my mind's eye when on the march to Siberia I had tried to guess what lay in store for me. But soon a whole host of the strangest surprises and most monstrous facts began to pull me up at almost every step. It was only later, after I had lived in the prison for quite a long time, that I was able fully to comprehend the exceptional and surprising nature of this existence, and I marvelled at it more and more. To tell the truth, this sense of wonderment stayed with me throughout the entire long term of my

imprisonment; I was never able to shake it off.

The first impression I had upon entering prison was a most loathsome one; but in spite of this – how strange! – it seemed to me that life there was much easier than I had imagined on the journey. Although the convicts wore fetters, they walked freely about the whole prison, swore, sang songs, did their own private work, smoked pipes, even drank vodka (though only a very few did this), and at night some of them played cards. The work itself, for example, did not seem at all like the hard, *penal* labour it was supposed to be, and I realized only much later on that its hardness and *penal nature* consisted not so much in its being difficult or unalleviated as in its being *forced*, compulsory, done under the threat of the stick. It is probable that the peasant in freedom works incomparably harder and longer, sometimes even at night, especially in the summer; but he works on his own account, with a reasonable end in view, and this makes it far easier for him than for the convict with his work that is compulsory and quite without use to him. The thought once occurred to me that if one wanted to crush and destroy a man entirely, to mete out to him the most terrible punishment, one at which the most fearsome murderer would tremble, shrinking from it in advance, all one would have to do would be to make him do work that was completely and utterly devoid of usefulness and meaning. Even though the work convicts do at present is both tedious and lacking in interest, in itself, as work, it is reasonable enough: the convicts make bricks, dig the land, do plastering, construction; in this work there is a sense and a purpose. The prison labourer sometimes develops quite a liking for such work, wants to do it more skilfully, faster, better. But if, let us say, he were forced to pour water from one tub into another and back again, time after time, to pound sand, to carry a heap of soil from one spot to another and back again – I think that such a convict would hang himself within a few days or commit a thousand offences in order to die, to escape from such degradation, shame and torment. Of course, such a punishment would quickly become a torture, a form of revenge, and would be pointless, because it would achieve no reasonable purpose. But since there is an element of this kind of torture, pointlessness, degradation and shame in all forced labour, the work that convicts do is vastly more unpleasant than any work done in freedom, simply because it is forced.

I arrived in the prison in winter, however, and had as yet no idea of the work which was done in summer, and which was five times as hard. In winter the amount of prison work done in our fortress was generally small. The convicts went to the River Irtysh to break up old wooden government barges, they worked in the workshops, shovelled the snowdrifts away from the government buildings after blizzards, baked and pounded alabaster, and so forth. The winter days were short, the work was soon at an end, and all our men made an early return to the prison, where there was practically nothing for them to do unless they happened to have their own work. But perhaps only a third of the convicts had work of their own, the rest frittered their time away, loitered aimlessly around all the prison barracks, swore, carried on intrigues, scandals, got drunk if a little money came their way; at night they would gamble away their last shirt at cards, and all this out of boredom, idleness and having nothing else to do. I subsequently came to understand that in addition to deprivation of freedom, in addition to forced labour, there is in a convict's life one more torment, one that is almost more powerful than all the others. This is *forced communal existence*. Communal existence is, of course, to be found in other places; but to the prison come such men as not everyone would care to cohabit with, and I am certain that all the convicts experienced this torment, even though for the most part they were not conscious of it.

The food, too, struck me as sufficient, on the whole. The convicts assured me that this was not the case in the convict battalions of European Russia. Of this I cannot judge: I have not been there. What is more, many of the convicts were able to have their own food. Beef cost half a copeck a pound, in summer it was three copecks. But only those convicts who had a constant supply of money could arrange to have their own food; most of them ate what the prison provided. When they praised the food they had in mind only the bread, and expressed satisfaction that it was distributed to all the men in common, and not portioned out by weight. This latter idea horrified them: if the bread had been distributed by weight a third of the men would have gone hungry; distributed to the artel, there was enough for everyone. The bread we were given was particularly appetizing, and its fame was well established in the town. People ascribed its high quality to the construction of the prison ovens. The cabbage soup was very unprepossessing. It was

cooked in a common cauldron, was slightly thickened with meal and, especially on weekdays, was thin and watery. The enormous quantity of cockroaches it contained horrified me. But the convicts gave this no attention whatsoever.

For the first three days I did not go to work; every new arrival received this treatment, and was allowed to rest after the journey. But on my second day I had to go out of the prison to have new fetters put on me. The fetters I had were not the regulation ones, but were the ringed kind, ‘jingers’, as the convicts called them. They were worn outside one’s clothes. The regulation prison fetters which were designed to be worn at work consisted not of rings, but of four iron rods, each of almost a finger’s thickness, connected by three rings. They had to be worn under one’s trousers. To the middle ring a strap was fastened, which in its turn was fastened to the belt one wore next to one’s shirt.

I remember my first morning in the barrack. In the guardhouse by the prison gate a drum beat through the dawn, and some ten minutes later the duty sergeant began to unlock the barracks. Men began to wake up. By the dim light of a tallow candle, the kind that is bought six to a pound, the convicts got up, shaking with cold, from their communal plank bed. Most of them were silent and sullen with sleep. They yawned, stretched and furrowed their branded foreheads. Some crossed themselves, others were already beginning to quarrel. The stuffiness was appalling. The fresh winter air burst in at the door as soon as it was opened, and flowed in clouds of steam through the room. The convicts crowded round the water buckets; in turns they took the dipper, filling their mouths with water and washing their hands and faces in it. The water was brought in the night before by the *parashnik* (latrine orderly). In accordance with prison regulations, each barrack had one convict, elected by the artel, whose responsibility it was to look after the room. He was called the *parashnik*, and did not go to work. His job was to keep the room clean, to wash and scrub the plank bed and the floor, to bring in and take out the night pail and to supply fresh water in two buckets – one in the morning, for washing, and another in the evening, for drinking. Quarrels began immediately over the dipper, of which there was only one.

‘Where do you think you’re shoving your way to, brand-head?’ snarled one tall, morose-looking convict, lean and swarthy, with strange protuberances on his shaven skull, as he jabbed his elbow

into another man, fat and stocky, with a merry red face. 'Stop where you are!'

'What are you shouting for? You have to pay folks for stopping where they are in our parts, you know; why don't you just clear off yourself? Gawd, look at him standing there, stiff as a monument. That means he's lacking in luckability, chums.'

The word 'luckability' produced a certain effect: many of the men laughed. This was all the genial fat man wanted. He was apparently the barrack's self-appointed jester. The tall prisoner looked at him with the most profound contempt.

'Fat sow!' he said, as if talking to himself. 'Look at him, stuffed with prison bread. Glad he's going to give birth to twelve little piglets in time for Christmas.'

At last the fat man grew angry.

'What kind of a bird are you, anyway?' he shouted suddenly, turning red in the face.

'Just a bird!'

'What kind?'

'This kind.'

'What kind's this kind?'

'Just this kind.'

'What kind?'

They both fixed their eyes on one another. The fat man waited for an answer, clenching his fists as though he meant to hurl himself straight into a fight. Indeed, I thought there was, in fact, going to be a fight. All this was new to me, and I watched with curiosity. But later on I realized that all such scenes were thoroughly harmless and practically never ended in fighting. All this was fairly typical, and was illustrative of the way men behaved in prison.

The tall convict stood calmly and majestically. He could feel that the prisoners were watching him and waiting to see if he would bring shame upon himself by his answer or not; that he had to sustain his position and prove that he really was a bird, and of what kind. He squinted at his adversary with inexpressible contempt, trying, in order to give the maximum offence, to look down on him over his shoulder, examining him as though he were an insect, and said, slowly and distinctly:

'King cockerel!...'

Meaning that he ruled the roost. A loud volley of laughter

greeted the man's quick-witted response.

'You're no king cockerel, you're a villain!' the fat man roared, sensing he had been outdone on all fronts, and flying into a violent rage.

But as soon as the quarrel started to take a serious turn, the two men were immediately set upon by the others.

'What's all the noise about?' the whole roomful of convicts yelled at them.

'Why don't you fight with your fists instead of your throats?' shouted somebody from a corner.

'That'll be the day,' came a voice in reply. 'We're a fearless lot, we are; as long as we're seven to one...'

'They're a nice pair, aren't they! One of them's doing time for pinching a loaf of bread and the other's just a runaway who got caught.'

'All right, all right, that's enough out of you!' shouted the disabled veteran who lived in the barrack, supervising it, and sleeping in a corner on his own bunk.

'Water, lads! Vet'ran Petrovich has woken up! Water for Vet'ran Petrovich, our dear brother!'

'Brother?... I'm no brother of yours. We've not so much as drunk a ruble's worth of vodka together, and now it's brother,' growled the veteran, struggling into the sleeves of his greatcoat...

Preparations for roll-call were being made. It was beginning to get light; in the kitchen a dense and quite impenetrable crowd had gathered. The convicts in their sheepskin coats and bicoloured caps were thronging round the bread which one of the cooks was cutting up for them. The cooks were chosen by the artel, two to each kitchen. They had custody of the kitchen knife that was used to cut up bread and meat; each kitchen had one of these. The convicts were sitting in every corner and around the tables, dressed in their caps, sheepskin coats and belts, ready to go out to work instantly. In front of them stood wooden cups of kvas. They crumbled their bread into it and sipped the mixture. The noise and hubbub were intolerable; but some men were talking reasonably and quietly in the corners.

'Good appetite, old man Antonych, and good morning to you!' said a young convict, as he sat down beside one who was toothless and frowning.

'Well, good morning, if you mean it seriously,' said the old man

without raising his eyes, trying to chew his bread with his toothless jaws.

‘You know, Antonych, I thought you were dead, I really did.’

‘No, you can die first, I’ll follow on later...’

I sat down beside them. On my right two sedate convicts were holding a conversation, each evidently trying to preserve his dignity before the other.

‘No one’s going to steal anything from me,’ one of them was saying. ‘It’s more likely I’ll steal something from somebody else.’

‘Well, keep your hands off my money or I’ll give them a nasty burn.’

‘Nasty burn, eh? Come off it, you’re just an ordinary con like the rest of us; cons, that’s what we are... she’ll grab all your money without so much as a by-your-leave. That’s how my last copeck went. She came here herself the other day. I didn’t know where to take her. I tried Fedka the hangman, he used to have a house in the outskirts, bought it from Scab Solomon he did, the Jew that hanged himself...’

‘I know him. He was one of the vodka sellers here three years ago, they used to call him Grishka Blackboozer. I know.’

‘The hell you do; Blackboozer was somebody else.’

‘No, he wasn’t! A fat lot you know. I’ve got that many witnesses...’

‘Oh yes? Where are you going to get them from, and who do you think I am?’

‘Who do I think you are? You, the one I used to beat the living daylights out of, no kidding, and you’re asking who do I think you are?’

‘Beat the living daylights out of, I like that. The man’s not been born that could beat me in a fight; and them that’s tried it are pushing up the daisies now.’

‘Bender pox.’

‘I hope you get the Siberian blackrot.’

‘I hope you end up talking to a Turkish sabre...’

And the cursing continued.

‘Here, here, here! What a racket!’ came the cry from men all around. ‘Couldn’t live as free men, now they’re glad they’ve got white bread to eat...’

This quietened the two men down at once. Cursing and ‘tongue-lashing’ were allowed. They were in part an entertainment for the

other prisoners. But fighting was not always allowed, and it was only in exceptional cases that two enemies would come to blows. Fighting was reported to the Major; searches would begin, the Major himself would arrive – in short, it would be no good for anyone, and for this reason fighting was not allowed. And indeed it was rather for the sake of entertainment and as a verbal exercise that the two enemies swore at one another. Not infrequently they would deceive themselves, they would begin in a terrible fevered frenzy, and you would think: in a minute they're going to throw themselves on one another; but not a bit of it: they would reach a certain point and then immediately part company. At first this was all a source of great surprise to me. I have purposely given here an example of the most common kind of prison conversation. At first I could not understand how they could swear for enjoyment, and find in this an amusement, a cherished exercise, a pastime. One must not, however, leave personal vanity out of account. The dialectician of the curse was held in great esteem. He was applauded almost like an actor.

On my first evening I had noticed that the men looked askance at me.

I had already caught one or two dirty looks. On the other hand, some of the convicts hung around me, suspecting I had brought money with me. They started at once to curry my favour: they began to instruct me in how I should wear my new fetters; they got me, in return for money, of course, a box with a lock, so that I could hide in it the items of prison property with which I had been issued and also what few of my own clothes I had been able to bring with me to the prison. On the following day they stole this box back from me and drank the proceeds from its sale. One of these men subsequently became my most devoted companion, although he never ceased to rob me at every convenient opportunity. He did this without the slightest embarrassment, almost unconsciously, as if following some compulsion, and it was impossible to get angry with him.

Among other things, they told me I ought to have my own supply of tea, and said it would be no bad thing if I were to have my own teapot as well; for the meanwhile they lent me someone else's teapot and recommended one of the cooks, who they said would cook for me whatever I wished for thirty copecks a month, if I wanted to eat separately and buy in my own provisions... Of

course, they borrowed money from me; on my first day alone each of them came to me three times asking me to lend him some.

In penal servitude former members of the nobility are generally taken a dim view of and are looked upon with ill will.

In spite of the fact that they have already been deprived of all their rights and are completely on a par with the other convicts, the men never accept them as their companions. This is not out of any conscious prejudice, but is simply so, a sincere and unconscious predisposition. They sincerely acknowledged us as noblemen, even though they liked to tease us about our fallen state.

‘No, that’s enough of that, stop! Pyotr was one of Moscow’s shining hopes, now Pyotr is sitting making ropes,’ and so on and so forth.

They looked with glee upon our sufferings, which we tried to hide from them. We had a particularly hard time at work because we were not as strong as they, and could not help them properly. There is nothing more difficult than to gain the confidence of the common people (especially these people) and to earn their love.

In the prison there were several men of noble origin. To start with, there were five Poles. I will speak of them separately later on. The convicts had a special dislike for the Poles, an even greater one than they had for those exiles who had been Russian noblemen. The Poles (I speak only of the political offenders) behaved with a sort of refined, insulting politeness towards them, were extremely uncommunicative and could in no way conceal from the convicts the revulsion they felt for them; the convicts, for their part, understood this very well and repaid them in their own coin.

It took me nearly two years of living in the prison before I won the favour of some of the convicts. But most of them came to like me in the end and acknowledged me as a ‘good’ man.

There were four Russian noblemen besides myself. One was a mean and villainous creature, horribly depraved, a spy and informer by trade. I had heard of him before I arrived in the prison and after the first few days I broke off all relations with him. The second was the parricide I have already mentioned. The third was Akim Akimych; I have seldom seen such an eccentric as this Akim Akimych. He has remained sharply imprinted upon my memory. He was tall, lean, slow-witted, practically illiterate, a born arguer and as punctilious as a German. The convicts used to laugh at him; but some of them were afraid to have anything to do with him because

of his fault-finding, exacting and quarrelsome character. He got on familiar terms with them from the word go, showered them with abuse, even fought with them. He was phenomenally honest. If he observed an injustice he would immediately intervene, even though it might have nothing to do with him. He was naïve in the extreme: for example, when he quarrelled with the other convicts he sometimes upbraided them for being thieves, and he would seriously exhort them not to steal. He had served as a lieutenant in the Caucasus. We were friendly right from my first day in the prison, and he lost no time in telling me about his case. He had started out as a military cadet in an infantry regiment stationed in the Caucasus, had toiled away there for an age and had finally been promoted to the rank of officer and been sent as a senior commander to some fortress or other. The chieftain of one of the neighbouring peaceful tribes had set fire to his fortress and had made a night attack on it; the attack had failed. Akim Akimych had been cunning and had not even given a semblance of knowing who the malefactor was. The incident had been laid on the doorstep of the hostile tribes, and a month later Akim Akimych had invited the chieftain along for a friendly chat. The chieftain had arrived, suspecting nothing. Akim Akimych had lined up his regiment; he had publicly accused and upbraided the chieftain, contending that it was shameful to set fire to fortresses. Right there on the spot he had delivered to him a most detailed reprimand concerning the way in which he should behave himself in future, and in conclusion had shot him; he had immediately reported the entire incident to the authorities. For all this he had been tried and sentenced to death, but his sentence had been commuted and he had been deported to the fortresses of Siberia to do forced labour for a period of twelve years. He fully admitted that he had acted wrongfully, and he told me that he had known this even before he had shot the chieftain, had known that the head of a peaceful tribe ought to be tried according to the law; but although he knew this, he was somehow unable really to admit that he was guilty.

‘But I mean to say, the fellow set fire to my fortress, didn’t he? What was I supposed to do, get down on my hands and knees to him and say thank you?’ he would reply in the face of any objections.

However, in spite of the fact that the convicts laughed at Akim Akimych’s eccentricity, they nevertheless respected him for his

punctiliousness and his capability.

There was no trade that Akim Akimych did not know. He was a joiner, a cobbler, a shoemaker, a painter, a gilder, a locksmith and had learned all these skills in prison. He had taught himself all of them: one glance and he got the hang of it. He also made various boxes, baskets and children's toys and sold them in the town. In this way he made a little money and he would immediately spend it on extra shirts and underwear, a softer pillow or a folding mattress. He lived in the same barrack as myself, and he helped me in many ways during the first days of my imprisonment.

When they left the prison in order to go to work, the convicts were lined up in two rows in front of the guardhouse; in front of them and behind them stood ranks of guards with loaded rifles. There followed the appearance of an officer of the engineers, an NCO and several engineers of lower rank who supervised the work the convicts did. The NCO counted the convicts and sent them to work in parties where they were required.

Together with the others I set off for the engineering workshop. This was a low, stone building which stood in a large courtyard that was heaped up with piles of various materials. Here there was a blacksmith's forge, a locksmith's, a carpenter's, a paintroom, and so on. Akim Akimych came here and worked in the paintroom, boiled the linseed oil, made up the paints and grained tables and other items of furniture to make them look like walnut.

While I was waiting to have my new fetters put on I talked to Akim Akimych about my first impressions of the prison.

'No, they don't like noblemen,' he observed, 'especially the political ones, they'd like to sink their teeth into them. No wonder. To start with, you're a different sort of person from them, and then again they were all serfs or soldiers before. You can see for yourself that they'd find it hard to take a liking to you. Life's tough here, I can tell you. And in the Russian convict battalions it's even tougher. Some of the men here have come from those battalions, and they can't say enough that's good about our prison, it's as if they'd left hell and swapped it for paradise. It's not the work that's the trouble. They say that over there, in the first category, the authorities are not completely military, at least they behave differently from the authorities here. They say that over there the convicts are allowed to live in little houses of their own. I've never been there, but that's what they say. They don't have their heads shaved; they don't wear

uniforms; though I must say I think it's a good thing we're made to wear uniforms and have our heads shaved; it's more orderly, and it looks better. Except they don't like it. Just look at that riff-raff! This one's a Kantonist, that one's a Circassian, over there we have a Schismatic, and there's an Orthodox peasant who's left his family and his dear children behind; there's a Jew here, and there's a gipsy, heaven knows what that one is – and they've all got to get along with one another no matter what, they've got to agree with one another, eat out of the same bowl, sleep on the same plank bed. And there's no freedom at all: if you've got an extra bit of food you must eat it on the sly, hide every penny in your boots, and the world is nothing but prison and more prison... You can't help getting some funny ideas in your head.'

But I already knew this. I particularly wanted to ask him about our Major. Akim Akimych made no secret of things, and I remember that the impression his words made on me was not an entirely pleasant one.

But I was destined to live for the next two years under his authority. Everything that Akim Akimych told me turned out to be perfectly true, with the difference that the impression made by reality is always more powerful than that made by a mere story. This man was frightening, because he had almost unlimited power over two hundred souls. In himself he was just a man of spite and impropriety, nothing more. He looked upon the convicts as his natural enemies, and this was his first and greatest mistake. He really did have some abilities; but everything about him, even that which was good in him, was somehow mangled and distorted. Ill-natured and lacking in self-control, he would sometimes even burst into the prison at night, and if he noticed a prisoner sleeping on his left side or on his back, he would have him flogged the next morning: 'Sleep on your right side like I told you to,' he would say. In the prison he was hated and feared like the plague. His face was crimson and malevolent. Everyone knew that he was completely in the hands of his personal attendant, Fedka. He cared most of all about his poodle, Trezorka, and almost went out of his mind with grief when Trezorka fell ill. It was said that he had sobbed over the dog as if it were his own son; he had dismissed one vet and, after his usual fashion, had almost come to blows with him. Hearing from Fedka that one of the convicts in the prison was a self-taught vet whose treatments were extremely effective, he immediately sent

for him.

‘Save my dog! I’ll load you with money, just make Trezorka well again,’ he shouted at the convict.

The man was a Siberian peasant, cunning, clever, really a very skilful vet, but a peasant through and through. ‘I had a look at Trezorka,’ he told the convicts afterwards, a long time after his visit to the Major, however, when the whole affair had been forgotten. ‘I looked: the dog was lying on the sofa, on a white cushion; and then I saw that it had an inflammation, that all that was needed was to let a bit of blood and the beast would get well again. “Well, I don’t rightly know,” I said. And I thought to myself: “What if I don’t bring it off, what if the beast dies?” “No, your honour,” I said, “you’ve sent for me too late; if you’d asked me to come yesterday, or the day before, about that sort of time, I could have done something for the dog; but now I can’t do anything...” ’

So Trezorka died.

They told me the details of an attempt on the Major’s life. In the prison there was a certain convict. He had already been with us for several years and was noted for his gentle behaviour. It was also observed that he hardly ever spoke to anyone. He was looked upon as some kind of a holy fool. He could read and write and for the whole of the past year he had read the Bible constantly, both by night and by day. When all the men had fallen asleep, he would get up at midnight, light a wax church candle, climb onto the stove, open the book and read until morning. One day he had gone to the duty sergeant and told him he did not want to go to work. They had reported the matter to the Major, who had flown into a rage and had instantly arrived at the gallop. The convict had hurled himself at him with a brick he had ready, but the blow had missed. The man had been seized, tried and flogged. All this had happened very swiftly. Three days later he had died in hospital. As he had lain dying, he had said that he intended no harm to anyone, but simply wanted to suffer. He was not, however, a member of any schismatic sect. He was remembered with respect in the prison.

At last they changed my fetters. While it was being done, several girls selling kalatches came into the workshop one after the other. Some of them were very young girls. They usually went selling kalatches until they were of age; the mothers baked, and they did the selling. When they were of age they kept on coming round the prison, but without kalatches; this was almost always the

case. There were also some who were not young girls. The kalatches cost half a copeck apiece, and almost all the prisoners bought them.

I noticed one convict, a carpenter, who was already grey-haired, but of fresh complexion, flirting with the kalatch sellers. Before their arrival he had wound a red calico handkerchief around his neck. One fat and pock-marked woman put her tray down on his bench. They started a conversation.

‘Why didn’t you come here yesterday?’ said the convict with a self-satisfied smile.

‘What? I did, but there was no sign of you,’ answered the woman, pertly.

‘We were wanted at work, otherwise we’d definitely have been here... Anyway, all your lot came to see me the day before yesterday.’

‘Who was that?’

‘Maryashka came here, and Khavroshka, and Chekundá, and Dvugroshovaya...’

‘What’s all this?’ I asked Akim Akimych. ‘Is it true?’

‘It does happen,’ he replied, modestly lowering his eyes, for he was extremely chaste.

It did of course happen, but very rarely and involving the greatest of difficulties. In general it would be true to say that the men were more interested in where, for example, they could get hold of a drink than they were in such matters, in spite of all the natural irksomeness of the life they were being forced to lead. It was difficult to get women. You had to choose the time and the place, you had to come to an agreement, make an assignation, find a secluded place, something that was particularly difficult, win over the guards, which was even more difficult, and altogether to spend an enormous sum of money, relatively speaking. But in spite of all this I did sometimes later witness love scenes, too. I remember one day in summer there were three of us in some shed or other on the bank of the Irtysh, firing a kiln; the guards were being good-natured. At last two ‘floozyies’, as the convicts called them, appeared.

‘Well, where have you been all this time? Up at the Zverkovs’, I’ll bet,’ was how they were greeted by the convict they had come to visit and who had been waiting for them for a long time.

‘All this time? A magpie could sit on a pole longer than I was at their place,’ the girl answered cheerfully.

This girl was the dirtiest I have ever seen. She was the one called Chekundá. With her had come Dvugroshovaya. She was beyond all description.

‘I haven’t seen you for ages,’ continued the ladies’ man, addressing Dvugroshovaya. ‘Got thinner, haven’t you?’

‘Maybe I have. I used to be that fat, but now it’s like I’d swallowed a needle.’

‘Still friendly with the soldiers, eh?’

‘No, that’s a lot of stories wicked tongues have told you; but anyway, what of it? Though he hasn’t got a bean, I love my soldier lad.’

‘You give up those soldier lads and love us instead, we’ve got money...’

To complete the picture it is necessary to envisage this ladies’ man, his head shaven, in fetters, wearing striped clothing and under guard.

I said goodbye to Akim Akimych and, learning that I might go back to the prison, I returned there accompanied by a guard. The convicts were already gathering. First to return were those prisoners who were on piecework. The only way to make a convict work hard was to put him on piecework. Sometimes the tasks assigned were enormous, but all the same they were completed twice as fast as they would have been if the men had been forced to work right up to the dinner drum. Once he had completed his task, the convict could go back to barracks without hindrance, and no one could stop him.

The convicts did not eat supper all together, but in the order ‘first come, first served’; indeed, the kitchen would not have been able to hold all of us at once. I tried the soup, but being unaccustomed to it could not eat it and made some tea for myself instead. We sat down at the end of a table. I had a companion with me who like myself was from the nobility.

The convicts came and went. But there was a lot of room, they had not all come back yet. A group of five men had sat down apart from the others at a large table. The cook poured soup for them into two bowls and placed on the table a platter of fried fish. They were celebrating something, and were having their own food to eat. At us they looked askance.

‘I’ve not been home, but I know it all,’ one tall convict shouted, as he came into the kitchen and looked round at all who were

present.

He was aged about fifty, lean and muscular. There was something shy and at the same time jovial about his face. Especially noticeable was his thick, sagging lower lip; it gave his face an extremely comical look.

‘Well, had a good night’s sleep? Not saying good morning, are we? Ah, our friends from Kursk,’ he added, sitting down beside the men who were eating their own food. ‘A hearty appetite to you! May I be your guest?’

‘We’re not from Kursk, chum.’

‘Maybe it’s Tobolsk, then?’

‘We’re not from Tobolsk, either. You’re not going to get anything from us, chum. You go and find the rich peasant, ask him.’

‘John Collywobble and Mary Belch have come to live in my belly today, brothers; and where does he live, this rich peasant?’

‘Gazin over yonder’s a rich peasant; you go and ask him.’

‘Gazin’s on a binge today, lads: he’s drinking all he owns.’

‘That’s twenty silver rubles,’ observed another.

‘It pays to be a vodka seller.’

‘So you’re not going to offer me anything, then? Oh well, I’ll just have to make do with the prison muck.’

‘You go and ask those gents over there for some tea.’

‘What gents, there’s no gents here; they’re just the same as we are now,’ said one convict who was sitting in a corner, in a gloomy tone of voice. He had not said a word until now.

‘I could use a cup of tea, but I don’t like to ask: we have our pride, you know,’ said the convict with the thick lower lip, looking at us good-naturedly.

‘I’ll make you some tea if you like,’ I said, inviting the convict to be my guest. ‘Would you like that?’

‘Like it? How can I refuse?’ He came over to the table.

‘Look at him! At home he used to drink soup out of his shoe, but here he’s discovered tea; he wants to have what his masters drink,’ said the gloomy convict.

‘Don’t people drink tea here, then?’ I asked him, but he did not deign to reply.

‘Here they come with the kalatches. What about a kalatch as well?’

The kalatches were brought in. A young convict appeared with a whole bundle of them in his arms, and sold them around the

prison. The baker woman allowed him to keep every tenth kalatch for himself; he was counting on that kalatch.

‘Kalatches, kalatches!’ he cried, as he came into the kitchen. ‘Moscow kalatches, hot from the oven! I’d eat them myself but I need the money. Well, lads, there’ll be one kalatch left over at the end. Which of you had a mother?’

This appeal to filial affection made everyone laugh, and several convicts bought kalatches from him.

‘One thing, lads,’ he said, ‘Gazin’s gone on the binge and he’s heading for trouble, God help him. What a time to pick for it. What if Eight-Eyes shows up?’

‘They’ll hide him. Real drunk, is he?’

‘And how! He’s turned vicious, started grabbing hold of folk.’

‘Well, that means it’ll end in a fight...’

‘Who are they talking about?’ I asked the Pole who was sitting beside me.

‘It’s Gazin, one of the cons. He sells vodka here. As soon as he gets a bit of money for the stuff he drinks it all away. He gets mean and vicious; but he’s quiet when he’s sober; when he gets drunk it all comes out; he goes for people with a knife. Then they have to calm him down.’

‘How do they do that?’

‘About a dozen of the prisoners charge at him and start beating him until he’s unconscious, they have to beat him half to death. Then they put him on the plank bed and cover him up with a sheepskin coat.’

‘What if they were to kill him?’

‘Anyone else and they would have killed him by now, but not Gazin. He’s incredibly strong, stronger than anybody else in the prison, and he’s got a constitution like an ox. The next morning he gets up as right as rain.’

I continued to question the Pole. ‘Tell me, they also have their own food to eat, and I have my tea. But they look at me all the time as though they envied me my tea. What does that mean?’

‘It’s not the tea that bothers them,’ replied the Pole. ‘They don’t like you because you’re from the nobility and are different from them. Many of them would like to pick a quarrel with you. They would like nothing better than to insult you and humiliate you. You will meet with a lot more unpleasantness here. All our lives are very hard here. Ours are harder than the rest in every way. You will

need all the detachment you are capable of in order to get used to it. You will meet again and again with unpleasantness and abuse because you drink tea and have your own food, even though very many of the men often eat their own food and some of them drink tea every day. It's all right for them to do it, but not for us.'

Having said this, he got up and left the table; a few minutes later, his words came true.

First Impressions (2)

M—cki, the Pole who had been talking to me, had no sooner left than Gazin burst into the kitchen, completely drunk.

The sight of this convict, drunk in broad daylight, on an ordinary weekday when everyone was compelled to go out to work, within close proximity of a strict commander who was liable to come into the prison at any moment, of a duty sergeant whose task it was to supervise the convicts and who never left the prison, of guards and veterans – in the close proximity, in short, of all this strictness, threw all the ideas I had begun to form about the convicts' daily lives into total disarray. And I had to live in the prison for a long time before I was able to explain to myself all the circumstances that were so mysterious to me in the early days of my imprisonment.

I have already said that the prisoners always had work of their own and that the desire for such work was quite natural given the conditions of prison life; that, as well as having this desire, the convicts were inordinately fond of money and prized it above all else, almost on a par with freedom, and that they felt consoled as long as they could hear it jingling in their pockets. On the other hand, a prisoner would be despondent, sad, restless and out of spirits if he did not have any, and then he would be ready to steal or commit any deed in order to get his hands on it. But, even though money was so precious in the prison, it never remained long with those who were lucky enough to possess it. For a start, it was difficult to keep it from being stolen or confiscated. If the Major found it during his sudden searches he confiscated it at once. Perhaps he spent it on improving the convicts' diet; at any rate it was to him that it was brought. But more often than not it was

stolen: it was impossible to trust anyone. We subsequently discovered a method of keeping money in complete security. It was given for safekeeping to an Old Believer, an old man who had come to us from the settlements of former Vetka schismatics at Starodubye... I cannot help saying a few words about him here, even though I disgress from my subject.

He was a little, grey-haired old man of about sixty. From the first time I set eyes on him he made a strong impression on me. He was so unlike the other convicts: there was something so calm and peaceful in his gaze that I remember I used to look with particular satisfaction at his clear, bright eyes, which were surrounded by fine, radiant wrinkles. I often used to talk to him, and in all my life I have seldom encountered such a good-hearted and kindly person. He had been sentenced for a very serious offence. Some converts had begun to appear among the Old Believers in Starodubye. The government had given these converts every encouragement, and had begun to exert every effort to gain the conversion of other dissenters. The old man, together with other fanatics, had decided to 'stand up for the faith', as he expressed it. Work had begun on the building of a Yedinover church, and they had burnt it down. As one of the instigators the old man had been sentenced to deportation and penal servitude. He had been a prosperous tradesman; he had left a wife and children at home; but he had gone into exile with fortitude, because in his blinded condition he had considered it a 'martyrdom for the faith'. After living for some time alongside him, one could not help wondering how this man, who was meek and gentle as a child, could ever have been an insurgent. I had several conversations with him on the subject of 'the faith'. He had relinquished none of his convictions; but there was never the slightest trace of rancour or hatred in his answers. And yet he had burned down a church, and did not deny it. Because of his convictions, he seemed to have considered his action and the 'martyrdom' he had endured for it as a noble cause. But no matter how closely I scrutinized him, studied him, I could never observe the slightest trace of pride or vanity in him. There were other Old Believers in the prison, mostly Siberians. They were men of great natural intelligence, wily peasants, passionate students and interpreters of the Bible who could also be dry-as-dust pedants, formidable dialecticians in their own way; men who were supercilious, arrogant, sly and intolerant in the extreme. The old

man was quite different from them. As an interpreter of the Bible who was perhaps superior to them, he avoided arguments. He was very sociable by nature. He was cheerful, he laughed frequently – not the coarse, cynical laughter of the convicts, but one which was clear and quiet, one in which there was a great deal of childlike simplicity and which somehow went very well with his grey hair. I may be wrong, but it seems to me that it is possible to tell a man by his laugh, and that if on first meeting you like the laugh of a person who is completely unknown to you, then you may confidently say that this is a good person. The old man had won the respect of the whole prison, but he was not in any way conceited about this. The convicts called him ‘grandad’ and never said anything that might hurt his feelings. I could understand in part the influence he must have had on his fellow-believers. But, in spite of the visible fortitude with which he endured his imprisonment, he nurtured within him a deep, incurable sadness which he tried to hide from everyone. I lived in the same barrack as he did. Once, at about three o’clock in the morning, I woke up and heard a quiet, restrained sobbing. The old man was sitting on the stove (the same one on which the Bible-reading convict who had tried to kill the Major had sat praying), and was reciting prayers from a handwritten book. He was weeping, and from time to time I could hear him say: ‘Lord, forsake me not! Lord, give me strength! My little children, my dear children, we shall never see one another again!’ I cannot describe how sad I felt. This was the old man to whom gradually nearly all the convicts began to give their money for safekeeping. Nearly all the convicts were thieves, but for some reason they all became convinced that the old man could not possibly do any stealing. They knew that he hid the money entrusted to him somewhere, but this was such a secret spot that no one would ever be able to find it. He subsequently explained his secret to some of the Poles and myself. In one of the posts of the fence there was a knot that looked as though it had grown firmly together with the wood. But it could be removed, exposing a deep hollow. It was here that ‘grandad’ used to hide the money and then put the knot back in again on top of it so that no one could ever find anything.

But I have digressed from my story. I was considering the question of why money never remained long in the convicts’ pockets. The fact was that quite apart from the trouble of keeping it

securely, there was too much in the life of the prison that was dismal; the convicts, on the other hand, were by their very nature creatures so hungry for freedom and, because of their social position, so light-minded and feckless, that it was a matter of course for them to be drawn by the sudden urge to 'spread themselves', to blow all the money they had on wild binges with a great deal of noise and music, trying to forget their misery if only for a minute or two. It was almost uncanny to see how some of them would work themselves half to death without respite for months on end, for the sole purpose of squandering in one day all they had earned, every last penny of it, and how then once again they would toil away until they had enough for another binge. Many of them were fond of buying new clothes, which had to be of the civilian, casual type: informal, black trousers, long-waisted coats, Siberian caftans. Cotton shirts and belts with brass studs on them were also very popular. They dressed up on holidays, without fail, and would go round all the barracks showing themselves off to everyone. Their pleasure in being well-dressed was so great as to be positively childlike; and in many respects the convicts were indeed perfect children. It is true that all these fine garments would suddenly disappear from their owners' possession, they would sometimes be pawned for next to nothing on the very evening of the day for which they had been bought. However, the binge would develop only gradually. It was usually timed to fit in with holidays or namedays. The convict whose nameday it was would get up in the morning, place a candle before the icon and say his prayers; then he would get dressed up and order dinner for himself. He would buy beef and fish. Siberian pelmeni – meat dumplings – would be made; the convict would eat like an ox until he was full, almost always alone, seldom inviting his fellow-convicts to share in the feast. Then the vodka would appear: the man would get as drunk as a lord and would unfailingly sway and stagger his way round all the barracks, endeavouring to show everyone that he was drunk, that he was 'having a good time', and thereby merit general respect. Everywhere among the Russian people a certain sympathy is felt for a man who is drunk; in the prison a drunk man was even treated with deference. Prison drinking had its own brand of aristocraticism. Once he had started his bout of revelling, the convict would hire a musician. In the prison there was a little Pole, a deserter, a thoroughly unpleasant character who none the less

played the violin and had his own instrument – his sole earthly possession. He knew no trade whatsoever and his only source of income was hiring himself out to play lively dances for convicts who were on a binge. His task was to keep following his drunken master from room to room, and to saw away on his fiddle for all he was worth. His face would frequently display boredom and depression. But the cry: 'Play, you've had your money!' would force him to start sawing away once more. When he started drinking, the convict could be firmly assured that if he got very drunk, the other convicts would look after him, would put him to bed in time and hide him if the authorities made an appearance, and that they would do all this quite disinterestedly. For their part, the duty sergeant and the veterans who lived in the prison to keep order could also put their minds entirely at rest: there was no possibility of the drunk man's causing any disorder. The whole barrackful of prisoners looked after him, and if he started to get noisy or rowdy he would be restrained at once, even bound hand and foot if need be. For this reason the lower echelons of the prison administration tended to disregard drunkenness, and indeed did not want to know about it. They knew very well that if they did not permit the men to drink vodka it would only be for the worse. But where did the vodka come from?

Vodka was bought in the prison itself from the so-called 'barmen'. There were several of these, and they carried on a steady and successful trade, even though the number of drinkers and 'revellers' was generally small, as drinking required money, which was hard for the convicts to get hold of. Transactions were embarked upon, consolidated and clinched in a rather unusual fashion. A convict might, for example, know no skill and not want to work (there were some like this), yet still want to get his hands on some money, being impatient to strike rich in a hurry. He might have a little money to start out with, and decide to deal in vodka: a bold undertaking, involving a large element of risk. He might have to pay for it with the skin of his back and be simultaneously deprived of both goods and capital. But the 'barman' would be prepared for this. He would not have much money to start out with, and so on the first occasion he would smuggle the vodka into the prison himself and of course sell it at a profit. He would repeat the experiment a second time, and a third, and if he did not fall into the hands of the authorities, he would quickly sell out. Only then would

he be able to lay the basis of a real trade on solid foundations: he would become an entrepreneur, a capitalist, employing agents and assistants, with a much lesser degree of risk to himself and a fortune that steadily increased. His assistants would run his risks for him.

In any prison there are always a great many people who have squandered, gambled and drunk away every last penny they own, people who know no trade, pathetic, ragged men who are none the less endowed to a certain extent with boldness and determination. All that such men have left by way of capital is the skin of their backs; this can still be put to some use, and it is precisely this ultimate capital that the reveller who has squandered all his money decides to put into circulation. He goes to the 'barman' and hires himself out to him as a smuggler of vodka into the prison; a rich 'barman' has several such assistants. Somewhere outside the prison there is someone – a soldier, a tradesman, sometimes even a woman – who uses the 'barman's' money to buy vodka in a tavern for a relatively large commission; this person hides the vodka in some secluded spot where the convicts come to work. The supplier nearly always tests the quality of the vodka first and hard-heartedly replaces what he has drunk with water. It is take it or leave it: a convict cannot afford to be too fussy, and he must be content that at least he has not lost all his money and that he has got his vodka, watered down, maybe, but vodka nevertheless. The smugglers who have been pointed out to him in advance by the prison 'barman' then report to this supplier, bringing with them the intestines of an ox. These intestines are first washed and are then filled with water – in this way they retain their original moistness and elasticity, so that they can eventually be used to contain vodka. Having filled the intestines with water, the convict wraps them around his body, if possible in its most secret parts. It goes without saying that as he does this he displays all the skill and thievish cunning of the smuggler. His honour is in part at stake: he must deceive both guards and sentries. And deceive them he does: a good thief will always get past the guard, who is often merely some new recruit. The guard is of course carefully studied in advance; the time of day and place of work are also taken into account. The convict who is a stovesetter will climb up onto the stove: who can see what he is doing there? It is not the guard's job to climb up after him. When he arrives at the prison he will have a coin in his hand – fifteen or twenty silver copecks, just in case, as he waits for the corporal at

the gate. Every prisoner returning from work is examined and frisked by the corporal before being allowed inside the prison. The vodka smuggler usually hopes that the corporal will be too embarrassed to frisk certain parts of his body. But sometimes the corporal reaches these parts, too, and feels the vodka. Then one last resort is left to the convict: without saying a word, out of sight of the guard, he presses the coin he has been hiding in his own hand into that of the corporal. As a result of this manoeuvre he occasionally gets safely into the prison with the smuggled vodka. But sometimes the manoeuvre does not succeed, and then he must pay with his last capital asset, his back. He is reported to the Major, his capital asset is flogged and flogged hard, the vodka is confiscated and the smuggler claims sole responsibility, keeping the 'barman' free of involvement in the matter. It should be noted, however, that he does this not out of any aversion for informing but simply because it is not in his interests to be an informer: he would still be flogged, even if he were to inform; his only consolation would be that both he and the 'barman' would receive punishment. But he will need the 'barman' again, although as a matter of custom and as the result of the prior agreement the smuggler will receive not one penny from the 'barman' for his flogged back. As regards the general matter of informing, it is normally a flourishing business. In prison an informer is not subjected to the slightest humiliation; the thought never occurs to anyone to react indignantly towards him. He is not shunned, the other convicts make friends with him, and if you were to begin to demonstrate to them the utter vileness of informing they would completely fail to understand what you were talking about. The gentleman prisoner, the base and corrupt creature with whom I had severed all relations, was friendly with the Major's personal attendant Fedka, and worked as a spy for him. Fedka would report all that he heard about the convicts to the Major. Everyone in our prison knew this, yet no one would ever have dreamt of punishing the villain or even of reproaching him.

But I have digressed. Of course there are also occasions when vodka is successfully smuggled in; then the 'barman' receives the ox intestines that have been brought to him, pays for them, and begins to estimate what they have cost him. His estimates usually show that the goods have cost him a great deal; and so, for the sake of greater profits, he decants it once more, again adding water to it in

almost equal amounts. Then, having thus made all his preparations, he waits for a customer. On the first holiday, and sometimes even on a weekday, the customer will appear: this will be a convict who has been labouring for months like a harnessed ox and who has saved up some money so as to be able to spend it all on drink on a day that he has previously earmarked for this purpose. Long before it arrives, this day will have been the object of the poor labourer's imaginings, both in his dreams at night and in happy reveries at work, and its magic will have sustained his spirit through the crushing round of prison life. At last the dawn of the bright day appears in the east; his money is saved up, it has not been confiscated, and he takes it to the 'barman'. The 'barman' starts by giving him the purest vodka possible, that is to say vodka which has only been twice diluted; but all that he drinks from the bottle is immediately replaced with water. For a cup of vodka, the convict will pay five or six times what it would cost him in a tavern. It may be imagined how many cups of such vodka must be imbibed and how much money must be spent in order for a man to get drunk. But because he has got out of the habit of drinking and because he has abstained for so long beforehand, the convict gets drunk rather quickly and usually continues to drink until he has spent all his money. Then he produces all his new clothes: the 'barman' is also a pawnbroker. First to fall into his hands are the convict's newly bought civilian clothes, then he takes his old clothes, and finally he ends up with the convict's prison clothes as well. When he has drunk away everything, right to the last rag, the drunkard goes to bed, and the following day, waking up with the inevitable excruciating headache, he begs the 'barman' in vain to give him just a sip of vodka for his hangover. Sadly he endures his misfortune and he begins work again that very same day; once again he works for several months without respite or relief, dreaming of his happy day of drunkenness that has sunk irrevocably into oblivion, and beginning little by little to take heart again and anticipate another such day, one which is still far off, but which will eventually in its turn arrive.

As for the 'barman', he, after making an enormous sum of money – several dozen rubles – lays in a final stock of vodka. This he does not dilute with water, since he intends to drink it himself. Enough of business: now it is his turn to do a little celebrating. There begins an orgiastic bout of drinking, eating, music. The

'barman's' means are considerable; he even wins over some of the more directly responsible, lower-ranking prison staff. Needless to say, the vodka that has been laid in is soon drunk; then the reveller goes to other 'barmen' in the prison, who are already expecting him, and drinks away every last penny he has made. No matter how hard the convicts try to hide him, higher-ranking officials – the Major, or the duty sergeant – sometimes catch sight of him. He is taken to the guardroom, his money, if he has any on him, is confiscated, and in conclusion he is flogged. Shaking off the flogging, he comes back to the prison and within a few days is setting up in business as a 'barman' again. Some of these revellers, the rich ones, needless to say, also dream of the fair sex. If they pay a large bribe to a guard, they can sometimes sneak their way out of the fortress with him to a destination somewhere in the outskirts, instead of going to work. There, in some secluded little house somewhere on the very edge of town, an enormous feast is held, and truly gigantic sums of money are squandered. Not even a convict is despised if he has money; the guard who is to accompany him is selected in advance, and will know how to go about his task. Such guards are themselves usually future candidates for prison. However, with money it is possible to do almost anything, and such journeys nearly always remain a secret. It should be added that they take place extremely rarely; a great deal of money is required, and lovers of the fair sex resort to other means, means that are quite without danger.

While I was still in the early days of my prison existence, my curiosity was particularly aroused by a certain young convict, a very good-looking youth. His name was Sirotkin. In some respects he was a rather mysterious creature. I was struck above all by his beautiful face; he was not more than twenty-three years old. He was in the special category, that is to say he was in for life, and this meant that he was considered one of the most serious of the military criminals. Quiet and unassuming, he spoke little and seldom laughed. His eyes were blue, his features regular, his face soft and clear-complexioned, his hair a very light brown. Even his semi-shaven head did not greatly spoil his appearance, so striking were his good looks. He had no trade, but he received small amounts of money quite frequently. He was conspicuously lazy and dressed in a slipshod manner. Someone might occasionally give him some decent clothes to wear, perhaps even a red shirt, and Sirotkin

would make no secret of the pleasure he took in his new clothes: he would make the rounds of the barracks and show himself off. He did not drink or play cards, and he practically never quarrelled with anyone. He used to go for strolls behind the barracks, his hands in his pockets, quietly and thoughtfully. It was not easy to imagine what he might be thinking about. Sometimes you might call to him out of curiosity, ask him about something or other, and he would reply at once in a tone of voice that was almost respectful, quite un-convict-like, but always terse and to the point; and he would look at you like a child of ten years old. When he got some money, he spent it not on necessities, such as giving his jacket in to be mended or buying new boots, but on kalatches and treacle cakes which he ate as if he were a child of seven. 'You're a right one, Sirotkin!' the convicts used to say to him, 'you orphan from Kazan!' Out of working hours he would usually wander around the other barracks; almost everyone else would be engaged in their own private tasks, he alone would have nothing to do. If the men said anything to him, it was nearly always something derisive (he and his companions were often made fun of), and he would turn round without saying a word and go to another barrack; sometimes, if the ridicule had been particularly fierce, he would blush. I often used to wonder how this quiet, artless creature had ended up in prison. At one time I was laid up in hospital, in the convict ward. Sirotkin was ill, too, and had the bed next to mine. At some point towards evening we started to talk; he grew unexpectedly animated, and told me in passing how he had been called up into the army, how his mother had wept as she had seen him off, and what a hard time he had had as a recruit. He added that he had found the life of a recruit quite intolerable, because everyone there had been so angry and strict, and the officers had found fault with him almost perpetually...

'So how did it all end?' I asked him. 'What did you do to finish up here? And in the special category, too... Ah, Sirotkin, Sirotkin!'

'Well, you see, Aleksandr Petrovich, I was only in the battalion for a year; I was sent here because I killed Grigory Petrovich, my company commander.'

'So I hear, Sirotkin, but I don't believe it. How could a man like you possibly kill anyone?'

'That's what happened, Aleksandr Petrovich. I was dreadfully miserable.'

‘But how do other recruits survive? Of course they’re miserable at first, but later on they get used to it, and lo and behold they turn out fine soldiers. Your mother must have spoiled you; I bet she fed you on milk and cake till you were eighteen.’

‘It’s true that my mother was very fond of me. When I went off to join the recruits she took to her bed and I heard that she never got up again... The recruit life really got to me in the end. My company commander took a dislike to me, he was always having me flogged – and for what? I knuckled under to everyone, minded my *ps* and *qs*; I never touched a drop of vodka, I never got into debt; it’s a sorry state of affairs, you know, Aleksandr Petrovich, when a man gets into debt. Everybody in the place was so heartless, there was nowhere to have a decent cry. I used to go away and cry in a corner somewhere. And then there was one time when I was on sentry duty. It was night; I’d been put in the guardhouse next to the armoury. There was a wind blowing: it was autumn, and that dark you couldn’t see your hand in front of your face. I felt so wretched, so wretched! I stood my rifle on its end, removed the bayonet and put it down beside me; I took off my right boot, put the muzzle of the rifle against my chest, leaned on it, and pulled the trigger with my big toe. It misfired. I examined the rifle, cleaned the touch-hole, poured in fresh powder, struck the flint and put the barrel to my chest once again. What do you suppose? The powder ignited, but the gun didn’t go off. What’s this, I thought. I put my boot back on, fixed the bayonet back again and walked about for a bit without saying anything. It was then that I decided to do what I did: I thought, I don’t care where they send me, as long as it’s out of here. Half an hour later the company commander arrived; he was inspecting the guards. He came right up to me: “Is this any way to stand when you’re on duty?” I took hold of my gun and sank the bayonet into him right up to the muzzle. I got four thousand lashes, and was sent here, to the special category...’

He was not lying. For what other reason would he have been assigned to the special category? Ordinary offences were punished far more lightly. Among his companions, Sirotkin was the only good-looking one. As for the others like him, of whom there were perhaps as many as fifteen in our prison, it was a strange experience to watch them: only two or three of them had faces that were tolerable to look at. The others were an ugly, slovenly, lop-eared bunch. Some of them already had grey hair. If circumstances

permit, I shall describe this group in more detail further on. Sirotkin was often on friendly terms with Gazin, the convict I referred to at the beginning of this chapter, when I described how he burst into the kitchen and how he upset my early notions of prison life.

This Gazin was a fearsome individual. He had a terrible and distressing effect on everyone. It always seemed to me that there could be nothing more violent and monstrous than this man. In Tobolsk I once saw the bandit Kamenev, who was notorious for his crimes; later I saw the deserter and terrible murderer Sokolov when he was being tried. But neither the one nor the other repelled me to the extent Gazin did. I sometimes thought I was seeing a huge, outsize spider, the size of a man. He was a Tartar, horribly strong, stronger than anyone else in the prison; he was taller than average, of Herculean build, with an ugly, disproportionately large head; he walked with a stoop, and his face wore a distrustful expression. Strange rumours about him circulated in the prison: it was known that he had been a soldier; but the convicts would have it, I do not know with what justification, that he was an escaped convict from Nerchinsk; that he had already been exiled to Siberia and escaped several times, that he had changed his name and finally ended up in our prison, in the special category. There was also a story that he had been fond of murdering little children, purely for pleasure: he would take the child away to some convenient spot; first he would frighten and torture it, then, delighting in the terror and quaking of his poor little victim, he would quietly and voluptuously slit its throat. This was all quite possibly a fantasy, a consequence of the general aura of unpleasantness with which, for most of the convicts, Gazin was surrounded; but all these fictions somehow suited him, and were in keeping with his appearance. All the same, except for the times when he was drunk, his prison behaviour was very cautious. He was always quiet, never quarrelled with anyone, and avoided the quarrels of others. But this, it seemed, was out of contempt for the other convicts, as if he thought himself superior to all the rest; he spoke very little and was almost purposely unsociable. All his movements were slow, tranquil and confident. From his eyes it was obvious that he was far from stupid, and extremely cunning; but there was always something haughtily derisive and cruel in his expression and his smile. He traded in vodka and was one of the most prosperous 'barmen' in the prison. But perhaps twice a year he experienced a compulsion to get drunk,

and it was then that all the brutality of his nature displayed itself. He would get drunk gradually, and he would start by picking on men with taunts of the most vicious kind, calculated and seemingly prepared long in advance; finally, when he was completely intoxicated, he would pass into a fearful rage, grab a knife and go for men with it. The convicts, who knew how appallingly strong he was, would scatter before him and hide: he would go for any man who crossed his path. But soon a way was found of dealing with him. A dozen or so men from the barrack he belonged to would rush him together and begin beating him. It is impossible to conceive of anything more cruel than this beating: they beat him in the chest, in the heart, in the solar plexus, in the stomach, they beat him long and hard, and only stopped when he was completely unconscious and looked as if he were dead. They could not have brought themselves to beat anyone else like this: to beat a man in this fashion meant to kill him – Gazin, however, they could not kill. After they had beaten him up they would wrap him, quite unconscious, in a sheepskin coat and carry him to the plank bed. ‘They say he gets over it once he’s had a rest.’ And so it was: the next morning he would get up almost well again, and would go out to work morosely and in silence. And every time Gazin got drunk, all the men in the prison knew that the day would end in a beating for him. He knew it too, but he went on getting drunk just the same. At length the men noticed that Gazin was starting to give in. He began to complain of various pains, to look noticeably ill; his visits to the hospital became more and more frequent... ‘He’s given in,’ the convicts would say to one another

He came into the kitchen in the company of the unpleasant little Pole with the violin, who was usually hired by convicts on drinking bouts for the completion of their entertainment, and stopped in the centre of the kitchen, passing his gaze silently and attentively over all those who were present. No one spoke. Finally, catching sight of me and my companion, he looked at us in malice and derision, smiled a self-satisfied smile, seemed to make some swift, private deduction and, staggering violently, came up to our table.

‘Permit me to ask,’ he began (he spoke Russian), ‘out of what proceeds your honours are pleased to drink tea in here?’

I exchanged glances silently with my companion, realizing that it was best to say nothing and not to answer. The slightest

contradiction would have sent this man into a frenzy of rage.

‘Got money, have you?’ he continued, in his interrogation of us. ‘Got a pile of money, have you, eh? Is that what you’ve come to prison for, to drink tea? Come to drink tea, have you? Say something, God damn you!...’

But seeing that we had determined to keep quiet and not pay any attention to him, he turned crimson and started to shake with rabid fury. Beside him, in a corner, stood a large tray which was used to contain all the bread that had been cut in slices for the convicts’ dinner or supper. The tray was so large that it could hold enough bread to feed half the prison; for the moment, however, it was empty. He seized it in both hands and brandished it above us. A few moments longer and he would have smashed our heads in. In spite of the fact that a murder or an attempted murder threatened the whole prison with extremely unpleasant consequences (searches and friskings would begin, there would be a tightening of restrictions, and so the convicts tried their utmost not to get themselves into such extreme situations): in spite of this, all the men now grew quiet, waiting for what would happen next. No one said one word in our defence; there was not one shout against Gazin, so powerful was their hatred of us. They were quite clearly pleased by the position of danger in which we had been put... But the incident ended harmlessly: at the very moment he was about to bring the tray down on us, someone shouted from the passage:

‘Gazin! Somebody’s stolen your vodka!’

He let the tray fall to the floor with a crash, and rushed out of the kitchen as if he had gone insane.

‘It’s God who’s saved them,’ the convicts said to one another. And they said this for a long time after. I was never able to find out afterwards whether this message about the stolen vodka had been genuine, or whether it had been invented in order to save us.

In the evening, after it had already grown dark, but before the barracks were locked up for the night, I took a walk round the perimeter fence, and a heavy sadness fell on my heart. Never subsequently, not during all the rest of my life in the prison, did I experience such sadness. The first day of imprisonment is hard to bear, whether it be in gaol, in a fortress or in penal servitude... But I remember that there was one thought which preoccupied me more than anything else, and which was subsequently to haunt me throughout the whole of my time in the prison. This was a thought

involving a problem that was to some extent incapable of solution: the problem of the inequality of punishment for the same crime. It is true that it is impossible to compare one criminal with another, even approximately. For example, there may be two criminals who have both killed a man: all the circumstances of each case are taken into account; and in each case the punishment determined is practically the same. But note what a difference there is between these two crimes. One criminal, for example, may have slit a man's throat just like that, for no reason at all, for the sake of an onion: he has gone out on the road and murdered a peasant who happened to be passing along with nothing on him but an onion. 'What's this, boss? You sent me out to get some loot and all I could find was an onion.' 'You idiot! One onion – that's one copeck! Go and do in a hundred peasants, then you'll have a hundred onions, and that'll make a ruble' (a prison legend). The other criminal has killed to defend the honour of his fiancée, his sister, his daughter against a debauched tyrant. One man has killed because he is a vagrant, beset by a whole regiment of police spies, defending his life and his freedom, often dying of hunger; another slits the throats of little children just for the hell of it, just in order to feel their warm blood on his hands, to savour their terror, their last dove-like quivering under his knife. And what happens? Both men are given penal servitude. There is, it is true, some variation in the length of the sentences they receive. But there are relatively few such variations; while of one and the same crime there is a countless multiplicity of variations. There are as many variations as there are human characters. But let us assume that it is impossible to reconcile, to iron out these differences, that this is an insoluble problem, like squaring the circle, let us assume that this is the case. Consider another difference, one that would exist even if this inequality did not, the difference in the consequences of a punishment... Here is a man who is wasting away in prison, melting down like a candle; and here is another who before he came here had no idea that there was in the world to be found such a merry existence, such an agreeable club of lion-hearted companions. Yes, men like these come to the prison, too. Here, for example, is an educated man with a sensitive conscience, with awareness, heart. The pain in his heart alone will be enough to do away with him, long before any punishment is inflicted upon him. Far more mercilessly, far more pitilessly than the sternest law, he condemns himself for his crime.

But here, alongside him, is another man who never once, during the entire duration of his imprisonment, reflects upon the crime he has committed. He even considers himself to be in the right. And there are still others who commit crimes solely in order that they may be sent to prison and there escape from the infinitely more prison-like existence they led as free men. In freedom a man may have lived in the last stages of degradation, never having enough to eat and working for his employer from morning till night; while in prison the work is lighter than it is at home, there is plenty of bread, and of a high quality the like of which he has never encountered before; on holidays there is beef, there are alms, there is the chance to earn a copeck or two. And the company? A crafty, clever lot who know everything; and so he looks on his companions with respectful wonder; he has never seen men like these before; he considers them the very highest society there is to be found in all the world. Can it really be said that the same punishment is felt by these two men in equal degrees? But what is the use of dwelling on problems that are insoluble? The drum is beating, it is time to go back to our barracks.

First Impressions (3)

The final roll-call had begun. After this roll-call the barracks were locked up, each with its own special lock, and the convicts remained confined in them until daybreak.

The roll-call was carried out by the duty sergeant and two soldiers. The convicts were sometimes lined up for it in the courtyard, and the officer of the watch would put in an appearance. But more often the whole ceremony took place in a homely fashion: the roll was called in the barracks. The callers often made mistakes, miscounted, went away and came back again. At last the poor sentries would arrive at the desired figure and lock the barrack door. The barrack held as many as thirty convicts, jammed closely together on the plank bed. It was still too early to go to sleep. Everyone, it seemed, would have to find something to do.

The only representative of the authorities who stayed in the barrack overnight was the veteran I mentioned earlier. Each barrack also had a head convict who was nominated by the Major, for good

behaviour, needless to say. These head convicts very frequently ended up by committing serious misdemeanours; then they would be flogged, stripped at once of all rank and replaced by others. The head convict in our barrack was Akim Akimych, who to my surprise would quite often shout at the other convicts. The convicts usually shouted back at him with jeers. The veteran was more sensible, and never interfered: if he did sometimes break his silence, it was only out of a sense of decorum, in order to put his conscience at rest. He usually sat on his camp bed in silence, stitching boots. The convicts paid hardly any attention to him.

On this first day of my prison life I made one observation which the passage of time convinced me was correct. This was that all those who were not convicts, whoever they were, from those, like guards and sentries, who were in direct contact with the convicts, to all those who were in any way connected with prison life, had a somewhat exaggerated view of the convicts. It was as if they spent each minute in the uneasy expectation of a convict going for them with a knife. But what was most remarkable was that the convicts were aware that they inspired fear, and this obviously gave them a certain audacity. Whereas the best commander for convicts is one who is not afraid of them. And indeed, in spite of their audacity, convicts do generally prefer to be trusted. It is even possible to win their favour in this way. During my time in prison it happened, although extremely rarely, that some senior official visited the prison without a personal guard. It was instructive to see how this impressed the convicts, and impressed them favourably. A fearless visitor of this type always aroused their respect, and even if there was a possibility that something unpleasant might happen, it would not happen in his presence. The fear that convicts inspire is to be found wherever there are convicts, and I really do not know what it springs from. It does of course have some foundation, starting with the convict's outward appearance, the look of the acknowledged bandit; in addition to this, anyone entering a prison can feel that this entire body of men has been assembled here against its will and that, whatever measures are taken, it is impossible to convert a living man into a corpse: he retains his feelings, his thirst for vengeance and life, his passions and his desire to satisfy them. Yet, in spite of this, I am positively convinced that there is no reason to be afraid of convicts. A man does not so readily or so swiftly go for another with a knife. In short, even if there is some possible danger

at times, one may conclude from the rarity of such unfortunate incidents that it is not a very great one. I speak here, needless to say, only of convicted prisoners, many of whom are glad that they have at last reached the prison (so attractive does a new life sometimes appear!) and are consequently disposed to behave quietly and peaceably; and, quite apart from this, their own kind will not allow the truly restless ones among them to behave with too much audacity. Every convict, no matter how bold and cheeky, is afraid of everything in the prison. The prisoner who is awaiting trial is another matter altogether. He is truly capable of physically assaulting a complete stranger for no reason at all, or only because, for example, he must endure a flogging the next day; and if a fresh charge is brought against him, his punishment will be postponed. In this case, the attack has a cause and a purpose: the purpose is 'to better his lot', at all costs and as rapidly as possible. I can even give the details of one strange psychological case of this type. In the military wing of our prison there was one convict who had been a soldier and who had not been deprived of his statutory rights. The court had given him a couple of years' hard labour, and he was the most arrant boaster and coward. As a rule, boasting and cowardice are very rarely met with in the Russian soldier. Our soldiers always seem to be so busy that they would not have time for boasting, even if they wanted to. But if indeed they are boasters, then they are nearly always loafers and cowards, too. Dutov (such was the name of this convict) finally polished off his short sentence and went back to his line battalion. But since all like him who are sent to prison for correction go to the bad for once and for all, it usually happens that after they have been on the loose again for two or three weeks, they end up facing trial once more and turn up in the prison again, this time not for two or three years, merely, but in the 'habitual' category, for fifteen or twenty years. Some three weeks after leaving the prison, Dutov stole something from under lock and key; in addition, he was found guilty of obscene behaviour and brawling. He was brought before the court and sentenced to a severe flogging with hard labour. Reduced to the last stages of terror by the punishment that awaited him, like the most wretched coward, the day before he was to run the gauntlet he took a knife and went for the duty officer who had entered his barrack. Needless to say, he understood very well that by an action like this he would immeasurably increase both the severity of the beating he would

receive and the length of the term of penal servitude he would have to do. But his calculations were centred only on postponing, even for a few days, a few hours, the terrible moment when the soldiers would begin to flog him. He was such a coward that when he went for the officer with the knife he did not wound him, but merely went through the motions of an attack for the sake of form, merely in order to establish a new crime for which he would have to be brought before a court once again.

The moment before the flogging that begins his punishment is of course dreadful for the convicted prisoner, and over several years I was to see rather a large number of men on the eve of that day which was so fateful for them. I used to encounter the prisoners awaiting punishment when I was ill in the convict ward of the hospital, which was quite often. It is a fact well-known to all the convicts all over Russia that the people who are most sympathetic towards them are doctors. The doctors never make any distinction between convicts, as almost all non-convicts do, with the exception of the common people. The latter will never censure the convict for his crime, no matter how terrible, and will forgive him everything because of the punishment he has endured and because of his general misfortune. It is not for nothing that the common people throughout Russia call crime a misfortune, and criminals 'unfortunates'. This definition is of profound significance. It is even more important because it is formulated unconsciously, instinctively. And the doctors are a real sanctuary for the convicts in many instances, especially for men who are awaiting punishment and are detained under conditions far more rigorous than those experienced by men who have already been punished... And so the prisoner who is waiting to be punished, having worked out for himself the probable date of the terrible day, often goes into hospital in an attempt to postpone the dreadful moment if only by a little. When he is discharged from the hospital in the almost certain knowledge that the day that follows will be the fatal one, he is nearly always in a state of violent agitation. Some try to conceal their feelings out of pride, but their clumsy, assumed bravura does not deceive their companions. Everyone knows what is up and keeps quiet out of common kindness. I knew one prisoner, a young man who had been a soldier: he had committed murder and had been sentenced to the maximum number of blows with the sticks. He was so stricken with terror that on the evening before he was

due to be beaten he made himself drink a whole jugful of vodka mixed with snuff. Vodka always turns up at a prisoner's side before he is flogged, by the way. It is smuggled in long before the day of the punishment and is obtained in exchange for large sums of money; the convict who is to be punished will gladly deny himself the most rudimentary necessities of life for six months in order to save up the sum needed to buy half a pint of vodka, to be drunk a quarter of an hour before the flogging. There is a general consensus of opinion among the convicts that a man who is drunk does not feel the lash or the sticks so keenly. But I have digressed from my story. The poor young man, having drunk his jugful of vodka, was immediately taken violently ill: he began to vomit blood, and was removed to hospital almost unconscious. This vomiting so ruptured his chest that a few days later he was discovered to have genuine symptoms of tuberculosis, from which some six months later he died. The doctors who treated his tuberculosis could not say what its origin had been.

However, in speaking of the cowardice often encountered in criminals before their punishment, I should add that on the other hand some of them astonish the observer by the extraordinary degree of fearlessness they display. I can remember several instances of bravery that amounted to a kind of insensibility, and these instances were by no means rare. I particularly recall my encounter with one fearsome criminal. One summer day a rumour started to circulate in the convict ward of the hospital that the notorious bandit and deserter Orlov was to be flogged that evening, and that after the flogging he was to be brought to our ward. While they waited for Orlov to arrive, the patients in the ward insisted that the flogging would be a savage one. They were all somewhat agitated, and I must confess that I also awaited the appearance of the notorious bandit with extreme curiosity. I had heard amazing stories about him. He was a villain of a kind that is rare, a man who carved up old men and children in cold blood. He was a man with a terrible strength of will and a proud awareness of his strength. He had confessed to many murders and had been sentenced to run the gauntlet. In the evening they brought him to the wing. It was already dark and the candles had been lit. Orlov was almost unconscious, terribly pale, with thick, tangled, jet-black hair. His back had swollen up and was a bloody blue colour. All night the convicts looked after him, brought him fresh water, turned him

over from one side to the other, gave him medicine, as if they were looking after a blood relation or a benefactor. The next day he had regained consciousness and walked twice round the ward! I found this quite amazing: he had arrived in the hospital in such a weak and exhausted state. In one go he had taken the entire half of all the strokes to which he had been sentenced. The doctor had only halted the execution of the punishment when he observed that any further flogging would inevitably bring about the criminal's death. Besides, Orlov was small of build and had a weak constitution; in addition, he was exhausted by the long time he had been held in confinement pending his trial. Anyone who has ever had occasion to meet convicts awaiting execution of their sentence will probably remember their thin, pale, emaciated faces and their feverish stares for a long time afterwards. In spite of that, Orlov quickly recovered. What apparently happened was that his inner psychic energy provided a powerful boost to nature. This man was not really quite an ordinary mortal. I sought closer acquaintance with him out of curiosity and studied him for a whole week. I can say unequivocally that never in my life have I met a man of stronger, more adamant character. In Tobolsk I once saw a famous criminal of the same type, a former bandit leader. He was just like a wild animal, and as you stood beside him, not yet knowing who he was, you had an instinctive feeling that you were in the presence of a terrible being. The most shocking thing about him for me was his spiritual indifference. The flesh had gained such an ascendancy over all his mental qualities that one glance at his face was enough to tell you that all that was left in him was a savage desire for physical pleasure, for sexual passion and carnal satisfaction. I am certain that Korenyev – that was the bandit's name – would have lost his nerve and would have shaken with terror if faced with an imminent flogging, in spite of the fact that he was capable of carving a man up without batting an eyelid. Orlov was his complete antithesis. This was truly a case of total victory over the flesh. It was evident that this man had boundless self-mastery, that he had nothing but contempt for any kind of torture and punishment, and that he was not afraid of anything under the sun. All that could be seen in him was an infinite energy, a thirst for activity, for revenge, and for the attainment of the goal he had set himself. I was also struck by his strange arrogance. He looked at everything in an incredibly haughty manner, not in such a way as to suggest that he was giving himself

airs, but somehow naturally. I do not think that there was any being in the world that could have influenced him by its authority alone. He looked at everything with a kind of unexpected calm, as if there was nothing in the world that could surprise him. And although he was fully aware that the other prisoners looked upon him with respect, he never showed off in their presence. This was particularly interesting, since vanity and arrogance are common to almost all convicts without exception. He had a great deal of common sense and was in some ways strangely outspoken, though not at all garrulous. To my questions he answered bluntly that he was waiting to recover so that he could receive the rest of his punishment as soon as possible, and that before the flogging he had at first been afraid that he would not be able to come through it. 'But now,' he added, winking at me, 'now it's all over. I'll take the rest of the flogging and then they'll send me straight off to Nerchinsk with a working party, but I'll escape on the way there. You bet I'll escape! Just wait till my back recovers!' And all during those five days he waited avidly for the moment when he could apply for his discharge. During this time he was sometimes very given to laughter and geniality. I tried to talk to him about his exploits. He would frown slightly during these questionings, but his replies were always frank. But when he realized that I was trying to get at his conscience, to secure at least some kind of repentance from him, he looked at me contemptuously and haughtily; as though in his eyes I had suddenly become a silly little boy to whom it was impossible to talk as one would to an adult. His features even expressed something approaching pity for me. After a minute or so, he burst out laughing at me in the most artless fashion, without any irony whatsoever, and I am certain that when he was alone once more and remembered what I had said to him, he had several good laughs to himself. In the end he was discharged with a back that had not quite healed; I was also being discharged at this time, and we returned from the hospital together: I to the prison and he to the guardhouse alongside, where he had been held previously. As we said goodbye to one another, he shook my hand, this being a sign of great trust on his part. I think he did this because he was so pleased with himself and the present moment. What it boiled down to was that he could not help despising me and seeing me as a weak, pathetic, submissive creature, in every way his inferior. The next day he was taken out for the second half of his punishment...

When our barrack was locked it suddenly took on a peculiar aspect – that of a real dwelling-place, a home. Only now could I see my companions, the prisoners, just as they might be at home. During the daytime, NCOs, officers of the watch and senior prison officials generally are liable to come into the prison, and for this reason the convicts behave slightly differently, as though not quite at their ease, as though expecting something to happen at any moment, and in a state of some anxiety. But no sooner was the barrack locked than all the men would sit down calmly, each in his own place, and practically all would begin to work at some handicraft or other. The room would be suddenly flooded with light. Each man had his own candle and candlestick, the latter usually made of wood. One would sit stitching boots, another sewing some garment or other. The foul air of the barrack would grow fouler from hour to hour. A little group of idlers would squat in a corner around a square of carpet spread on the floor, playing cards. Almost every barrack had a convict who owned a small square of threadbare carpet and a pack of incredibly soiled, greasy cards. Such an outfit was known as a *maydan*. Its owner would rent it out to convicts who wanted to gamble at cards, for a charge of fifteen copecks per night; this was how he made his money. The gamblers usually played games like ‘three leaves’, ‘cabinet’, and so on. They were all games of chance. Each player placed a heap of copper coins in front of him – all that he had in his pockets – and got up only when he had lost everything or had taken all his companions’ money. The game finished late at night, and sometimes lasted until dawn, until the very moment the barrack was unlocked. In our barrack, as in all the others in the prison, there were always some men who were beggars, destitute former nomads who had gambled or drunk all their money away, or who were quite simply beggars by nature. I say ‘by nature’, and wish to place particular emphasis on this expression. It is a fact that everywhere among our people, whatever the surroundings, under whatever conditions, there are always a few strange characters who are peaceable and by no means lazy, but who seem to have been fated to remain beggars to the end of their days. They are always solitary men without family, they always wear an air of neglect, they always look downtrodden and depressed about something, and they are forever being ordered about by someone, running errands for someone, usually an idler or a nouveau riche. Every original

idea, every initiative is a vexation and a burden to them. It is as if they had been born on condition that they initiate nothing themselves, but merely serve and live according to the will of others, dance to another man's tune; their purpose in life is to carry out forever the wishes of someone else. To cap it all, no change of circumstances, no spin of the wheel of fortune can ever make them rich. They remain beggars forever. I have noticed that such characters are encountered not only among the common people, but among all societies, classes, parties, journals and associations. It was the same in every barrack, in every prison: no sooner had a *maydan* been assembled than someone like this immediately appeared in order to service it. And indeed, no *maydan* could function without such an attendant. He was usually hired by all the gamblers together for the whole night, at a rate of around five silver copecks, and his principal duty was to stand on watch all night. He usually froze and shivered in the darkness of the passage for some six or seven hours in a temperature of minus thirty degrees, listening for every tap, every clang, every step that came from outside. The Major or the sentries sometimes appeared in the prison rather late at night. They would enter quietly and discover the card-players, the men at their work, and the extra candles, the light from which could be seen outside. At any rate, when the lock on the door from the passage to the yard began to make sudden clanking sounds, it was too late to hide, to snuff out the candles and lie down on the plank bed. But since the attendant on watch got a very rough reception from the users of the *maydan* afterwards, the number of such unfortunate cases was extremely small. Five copecks is, of course, a ridiculously small payment, even in prison; but I was always struck by the hardness and lack of mercy shown by the men who did the hiring, both in this and in all other cases I witnessed. 'You've had your money, now get on with the job!' This was an argument that admitted of no rebuttal. For every half copeck he paid out, the hirer would take all that he could, he would even take more if possible, and would still consider he was doing the man a favour. The idler, the drunkard who threw his money to right and to left without heed always short-changed his attendant, and I observed this to be the case in more than one prison, in more than one *maydan*.

I have already said that almost everyone in the barrack settled down to some form of occupation: leaving aside the gamblers, there

were not more than five men who were completely idle; they went to bed immediately the barrack was locked. My place on the plank bed was right next to the door. On the other side of the planking, his head next to mine, Akim Akimych had his place. He worked until about ten or eleven, glueing together a multicoloured Chinese lantern for some customer in the town who had ordered it and would pay rather handsomely for it. Akim Akimych was most adept at making these lanterns, and he worked methodically, without pause; when he had finished working, he cleared everything neatly away, spread out his mattress, said his prayers and lay down obediently on the bed. He took this obedience and this sense of order, it appeared, to the most trivially pedantic extremes; it was obvious that, like all narrow-minded and limited people, he considered himself to be very clever. I took a dislike to him from my very first day in the prison, though I recall that on that first day I thought about him a great deal and found that my main reaction was one of surprise that such a man, instead of making a success of his life, had ended up in prison. I shall have occasion to speak of Akim Akimych several times in what follows.

But let me briefly describe the inhabitants of our barrack. I was to live many years in it, and all these men were to be my future barrack-mates and companions. The reader will understand that I looked at them all with avid curiosity. To the left of my place on the plank bed a group of Caucasian mountain tribesmen had their berths. Most of them had been sent here for armed robbery and their terms were of varying duration. There were two Lezghins, a Chechen and three Daghestan Tartars. The Chechen was a sullen and morose creature; he hardly ever spoke to anyone and constantly looked around him with hatred and mistrust, his smile envenomed and maliciously sneering. One of the Lezghins was an old man, with a long, thin, angular nose, who looked every inch a bandit. But the other one, Nurra, made the most pleasing and likeable impression on me from the first day. He was still young, not very tall, and Herculean in build. His hair was completely blond, and he had light blue eyes; he was snub-nosed, had a face like that of a Finnish woman, and was bow-legged from having spent his earlier life constantly on horseback. His entire body had been hacked and scarred all over by bayonets and bullets. In the Caucasus he had belonged to a peaceful tribe, but had made constant visits on the sly to the hostile mountain tribesmen and had taken part with them in

attacks on the Russians. Everyone in the prison was very fond of him. He was always cheerful, had a friendly word for everyone, worked without complaining and was placid and serene, though he often surveyed the vileness and filth of the convicts' lives with indignation and was filled with rage by any kind of thieving, foul play, drunken behaviour or indeed by anything that was dishonourable; but he did not start quarrels, simply turned away in angry disapproval. During the whole of his stay in prison he never once stole anything, never committed one unworthy act. He was extremely religious, and said his prayers devoutly. During the fasts that preceded the Islamic feast days he would go without food and drink like a fanatic, and stand whole nights on end in prayer. He was liked by everyone and everyone believed in his honesty. 'Nurra's a lion,' the convicts used to say; and the nickname 'lion' stayed with him. He was resolutely convinced that when he had served out his prison sentence he would be returned to his home in the Caucasus, and he lived in the hopeful expectation of that day. I think that if he had been deprived of this hope he would have died. From my first day in the prison he struck my attention forcibly. It was impossible not to notice his kindly, sympathetic face among the malicious, sullen and sneering countenances of the other convicts. I had hardly been half an hour in the prison when, walking past me, he patted me on the shoulder, laughing in my face as he did so. At first I did not understand what this meant. Besides, his Russian was very bad. Soon after this he gave me a friendly clap on the shoulder. He did this again and again, and so it went on for three days. As I guessed at the time and as I discovered subsequently to be the case, this meant that he felt sorry for me, that he sensed how difficult it was for me to get my bearings in the prison, that he wanted to show me his friendship, raise my spirits and make me feel assured of his protection. Good, simple-hearted Nurra!

There were three Daghestan Tartars, and they were all brothers. Two of them were getting on in years, but the third, Aley, was no more than twenty-two and looked even younger. His place on the plank bed was next to mine. His handsome, open, intelligent, and at the same time good-naturedly straightforward face drew my heart to him at once, and I was so glad that it was him fate had sent me as a neighbour, and not some other prisoner. All of his soul was expressed in his handsome, one might even say beautiful face. His smile was so full of trust, so childishly guileless; his large black eyes

were so soft, so tender that the sight of him brought me a peculiar contentment, even an alleviation of my depression and sadness. I am not exaggerating. Back in Daghestan one of his elder brothers (he had five brothers, who were older than him; two of them had ended up in some factory or other) had once told him to take his sabre and mount his horse, so that they could set off on some kind of expedition together. Respect for older family members is so great among the mountain tribesmen that not only did the boy not dare, he did not even think to ask where they were going. The others did not consider it necessary to tell him. They were all going off on a bandit raid, to ambush and rob a rich Armenian merchant on the road. So it was: they killed the escort, cut the Armenian's throat and pillaged his wares. But the crime was discovered: all six of them were seized, brought before a court, convicted, flogged and sent to Siberia to do penal labour. The only mercy shown by the court to Aley was the reduction in his sentence; he was deported for four years. His brothers had a great affection for him, and this was more of a fatherly than of a brotherly kind. He was a comfort to them in their exile, and they, who were generally morose and sullen, always smiled when they looked at him. When they talked to him (and they spoke to him very little, as if they considered him a boy with whom it was impossible to discuss serious matters), their stern faces relaxed and I would guess that they were talking about something humorous, almost childish; at any rate, they would always look at one another and laugh good-naturedly when they listened to his reply. He himself hardly ever dared to speak to them first, such was the esteem in which he held them. It is difficult to imagine how this boy could have preserved such tenderness of heart throughout all the time of his imprisonment, how he could have nurtured within himself such sincerity, such a likeable disposition, such a resistance to coarseness and profligate behaviour. He was, however, a person of strength and perseverance, in spite of all his obvious gentleness. I got to know him well later on. He was as chaste as a pure maiden, and a base, cynical, filthy, unjust or violent action committed by anyone in the prison lit a fire of indignation in his beautiful eyes, which thereby grew all the more beautiful. But he avoided quarrels and cursing, though he was not generally one to let himself be insulted without getting his own back, and he knew how to stand up for himself. He quarrelled with no one, however: everyone liked him and everyone treated him with affection. To me he was at first

merely polite. Little by little I began to hold conversations with him; within a few months he had learned to speak excellent Russian, something his brothers did not achieve in all the time they spent in the prison. He seemed to me an extremely intelligent youth, extremely modest and fastidious; he seemed also to have thought already a great deal about life. It is perhaps as well if I say now in advance that I consider Aley no ordinary human being, and I remember my meeting with him as one of the best I experienced in all my life. There are certain natures so inherently beautiful, so richly endowed by God that the very notion that they could ever alter for the worse seems an impossible one. Your mind will always be at rest where they are concerned. My mind is at rest concerning Aley now. Where is he now?...

Once, quite a long time after my arrival in the prison, I was lying on the plank bed thinking miserably about something or other. Aley, normally always active and industrious, had his hands free for once, even though it was too early to go to bed yet. But this was the time of their Islamic holiday, and they were not working. He lay with his hands behind his head, thinking about something. Suddenly he asked me:

‘Are you feeling very miserable just now?’

I looked at him with curiosity; this swift, direct question from Aley seemed strange to me, Aley who was always so fastidious, so scrupulous, so clever of heart: but, looking more attentively, I saw in his face so much anguish, so many painful memories that I immediately realized he himself was intensely miserable, particularly at that very moment. I told him what I had surmised. He gave a sigh and smiled sadly. I liked his smile, it was always tender and full of warmth. Moreover, when he smiled, he exposed two rows of pearly teeth which might have been envied by the most beautiful woman in the world.

‘Why Aley, I expect you’ve been thinking about the way they’re celebrating this holiday in Daghestan, haven’t you? It’s nice there, I bet?’

‘Yes,’ he answered with enthusiasm, and his eyes shone. ‘How did you know I was thinking about that?’

‘How could I help knowing? Well, is it better there than it is here?’

‘Oh, why do you say that?...’

‘What flowers there must be now in that country of yours, what

paradise!...'

'O—oh, don't go on.' He was extremely agitated.

'Listen, Aley, do you have a sister, back there?'

'Yes, but what's it to you?'

'She must be a beautiful woman if she looks anything like you.'

'Like me? She's so beautiful that there's no woman to compare with her in the whole of Daghestan. My sister! You've never seen anything like her. My mother's beautiful, too.'

'And did your mother love you?'

'Oh, what are you saying? She's probably died of a broken heart thinking about me by now. I was her favourite son. She loved me more than my sister, more than anyone else... Last night I dreamed that she came here and cried over me.'

He stopped talking, and did not say another word that evening. But from that time onwards he looked for every opportunity of talking to me, although a feeling of respect which for some reason he had for me restrained him from ever being the one to start up our conversations. But he was very pleased if I spoke to him. I questioned him about the Caucasus, about his previous life. His brothers did not prevent him from talking to me, they even seemed to like it. Seeing me grow fonder and fonder of Aley, they became much more friendly towards me.

Aley helped me with my work and did what he could to be of service to me in the barracks. It was evident that he very much enjoyed making things even a little easier for me, that he enjoyed obliging me, and in his endeavour to oblige there was not the slightest element of self-degradation or desire for any kind of advantage, but rather a warm, friendly feeling for me, one which by now he did not trouble to conceal. What was more, he had a great many mechanical skills: he had learned how to do a pretty good job of sewing up a shirt or a set of underwear, he could make a pair of boots, and later on he learned as much carpentry as he could. His brothers praised him and were proud of him.

'Listen, Aley,' I said to him once. 'Why don't you learn to read and write Russian? Don't you know how useful that would be for you here in Siberia later on?'

'I'd like to, very much. But who would give me lessons?'

'There are plenty of educated men here! Well, would you like me to teach you?'

'Oh yes, please do!' And he almost stood up on the plank bed,

putting his hands together beseechingly and looking at me.

We started our lessons the following evening. I had a Russian translation of the New Testament – a book that was not forbidden in the prison. Using this book alone, without any alphabet, Aley gained a first-rate reading ability within the space of a few weeks. After three weeks he already had a thorough knowledge of literary Russian. He learned with fervour, with enthusiasm.

We once read the whole of the Sermon on the Mount together. I noticed that he articulated some passages with special feeling.

I asked him if he liked what he had been reading.

He looked up quickly and the colour came flooding to his cheeks.

‘Oh yes,’ he replied. ‘Yes, Jesus is a holy prophet, Jesus spoke the words of Allah. How good it is.’

‘Which part do you like best?’

‘Where he says: “Forgive, love, don’t hurt others and love your enemies, too.” Oh, what he says is so good.’

He turned to his brothers, who were listening to our conversation, and began saying something heatedly to them. They had a long, serious talk together, nodding their heads affirmatively all the time. Then with grandly benevolent, that is to say purely Muslim smiles (which I like so much precisely for their grandeur), they turned to me and confirmed that Jesus was indeed a prophet of Allah and that he had performed great miracles; that he had made a bird out of clay, blown on it, and it had flown away... and that this was written in their books. As they said this, they were quite confident that their praise of Jesus would give me great pleasure, and Aley was obviously overjoyed that his brothers had decided they wanted to please me in this way.

Our writing lessons were also extremely successful. Aley managed to get hold of some paper (and would not allow me to pay for it), pens, ink, and in the space of something like two months had learned to write perfectly. Even his brothers were taken with this. Their pride and satisfaction knew no bounds. They could not thank me enough. If it happened that we were working together, they would vie with one another to help me and considered doing so a great stroke of fortune. That is to say nothing of Aley. He loved me, perhaps, as much as he loved his brothers. I will never forget the day he left prison. He took me behind the barrack and there threw his arms around my neck and burst into tears. He had never kissed

me or cried in my presence before. 'You've done so much for me, so much,' he said, 'that my own father and mother could not have done as much: you've made me into a man, God will reward you and I will never forget you...'

Where are you, where are you now, my dear, dear good Alek?...

Besides the Circassians there was in our barracks a whole group of Poles, who constituted an entirely separate family, and who had practically no communication with the other convicts. I have already said that for their exclusivity and their hatred of the Russian convicts, they were in their turn hated by the others. These were sick, exhausted men: there were six of them. Some of them were educated; of these I will speak in detail later on. During the final years of my life in the prison I sometimes got books from them. The first book I read had a strong and peculiar effect on me. I will describe these impressions in detail elsewhere. I find them rather curious, and I am sure that they will be quite incomprehensible to most people. It is impossible to judge certain phenomena without having experienced them. I will say one thing: that moral deprivations are harder to bear than any physical torments. When the common man goes to prison he arrives among his own kind of society, perhaps even among a society that is more developed than the one he has left. He has, of course, lost a great deal: his country, his family, everything – but his environment remains the same. An educated man, subject by law to the same punishment as the commoner, often loses incomparably more. He must suppress in himself all his normal wants and habits; he must make the transition to an environment that is inadequate for him, he must learn to breathe an air that is not suited to him... He is a fish that has been dragged out of the water and onto the sand... And often the punishment that the law considers equal and apportions equally becomes ten times more painful for him. This is true even if we only take into account the material habits which he must sacrifice.

But the Poles had formed their own private, exclusive group. There were six of them, and they stuck together. Of all the other convicts in our barrack they liked only the Jew, for the sole reason, perhaps, that they found him amusing. However, the other convicts also liked our Jew, though they all without exception laughed at him. He was the only Jew in our barrack, and even now I cannot

recall him without laughing. Every time I looked at him I would think of the Jew Yankel in Gogol's *Taras Bulba* who, when he undressed in order to climb, together with his Jewess, into some sort of cupboard, looked uncommonly like a chicken. Isay Fomich, our Jew, was the spitting image of a plucked chicken. He was no longer young, a man of about fifty, of small stature and weak constitution, cunning and at the same time decidedly stupid. He was insolent and arrogant, and at the same time a terrible coward. He was covered in a kind of wrinkles, and on his forehead and cheeks there were brand-marks which had been burned there on the scaffold. I could not for the life of me understand how he had been able to bear sixty lashes. He had been sent here on a charge of murder. He carried hidden on him a prescription which his fellow-Jews had acquired from a doctor for him immediately after his flogging and branding on the scaffold. With this prescription he could obtain an ointment that would remove his brand-marks in a couple of weeks. He did not dare to use this ointment in the prison and was waiting for his twelfth year in the prison to be up; after that he would be sent to be a settler, and he firmly intended then to make use of the prescription. 'If not, so how vood I get married?' he said to me once. 'And I vant so much to get married.' He and I were great friends. He was always in the most excellent of spirits. He found life in the prison easy; he was a jeweller by trade, and he was swamped by orders from the town, where there was no jeweller, and by this means escaped work that was physically demanding. Needless to say, he was a moneylender as well, and he kept the whole prison supplied with money at interest and on security. He had come here before me, and one of the Poles described his arrival to me in detail. It is a very funny story, which I will tell later on; I shall have occasion to speak of Isay Fomich in several other contexts.

The other inhabitants of our barrack were four Old Believers, old men who were assiduous and dogmatically literal readers of the Bible (the old man from the Starodubye settlement was one of them); two or three Ukrainians, dreary men; a young convict with a thin face and a thin nose, aged about twenty-three, who had already murdered eight people; a group of forgers, one of whom was the life and soul of the whole barrack; and finally a few gloomy, morose individuals who were unshaven and disfigured, close-jawed and envious, looked distrustfully and with hatred

around them, and did so intentionally; who would remain frowning, close-jawed and full of hatred for long years yet to come – for the entire duration of their imprisonment. All this merely glimmered before my eyes on this first, joyless evening of my new life – glimmered amidst the smoke and soot, the oaths and utter cynicism, in the foul air, to the clanking of fetters, amidst curses and shameless laughter. I lay on the bare plank bed with my clothes under my head (I did not yet have a pillow then), and covered myself with my sheepskin coat; but I could not get to sleep for a long time, although I was completely exhausted and broken from all the monstrous and unexpected impressions of that first day. But my new life was only just beginning. A great deal still lay ahead of me, things of which I had never had any idea, things I had never foreseen...

1. Seneca *On the Shortness of Life*
2. Marcus Aurelius *Meditations*
3. St Augustine *Confessions of a Sinner*
4. Thomas à Kempis *The Inner Life*
5. Niccolò Machiavelli *The Prince*
6. Michel de Montaigne *On Friendship*
7. Jonathan Swift *A Tale of a Tub*
8. Jean-Jacques Rousseau *The Social Contract*
9. Edward Gibbon *The Christians and the Fall of Rome*
10. Thomas Paine *Common Sense*
11. Mary Wollstonecraft *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*
12. William Hazlitt *On the Pleasure of Hating*
13. Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels *The Communist Manifesto*
14. Arthur Schopenhauer *On the Suffering of the World*
15. John Ruskin *On Art and Life*
16. Charles Darwin *On Natural Selection*
17. Friedrich Nietzsche *Why I am So Wise*
18. Virginia Woolf *A Room of One's Own*
19. Sigmund Freud *Civilization and Its Discontents*
20. George Orwell *Why I Write*
21. Confucius *The First Ten Books*
22. Sun-tzu *The Art of War*
23. Plato *The Symposium*
24. Lucretius *Sensation and Sex*
25. Cicero *An Attack on an Enemy of Freedom*
26. *The Revelation of St John the Divine* and *The Book of Job*
27. Marco Polo *Travels in the Land of Kubilai Khan*
28. Christine de Pizan *The City of Ladies*
29. Baldesar Castiglione *How to Achieve True Greatness*
30. Francis Bacon *Of Empire*
31. Thomas Hobbes *Of Man*
32. Sir Thomas Browne *Urne-Burial*
33. Voltaire *Miracles and Idolatry*
34. David Hume *On Suicide*
35. Carl von Clausewitz *On the Nature of War*
36. Søren Kierkegaard *Fear and Trembling*

37. Henry David Thoreau *Where I Lived, and What I Lived For*
38. Thorstein Veblen *Conspicuous Consumption*
39. Albert Camus *The Myth of Sisyphus*
40. Hannah Arendt *Eichmann and the Holocaust*
41. Plutarch *In Consolation to his Wife*
42. Robert Burton *Some Anatomies of Melancholy*
43. Blaise Pascal *Human Happiness*
44. Adam Smith *The Invisible Hand*
45. Edmund Burke *The Evils of Revolution*
46. Ralph Waldo Emerson *Nature*
47. Søren Kierkegaard *The Sickness unto Death*
48. John Ruskin *The Lamp of Memory*
49. Friedrich Nietzsche *Man Alone with Himself*
50. Leo Tolstoy *A Confession*
51. William Morris *Useful Work v. Useless Toil*
52. Frederick Jackson Turner *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*
53. Marcel Proust *Days of Reading*
54. Leon Trotsky *An Appeal to the Toiling, Oppressed and Exhausted Peoples of Europe*
55. Sigmund Freud *The Future of an Illusion*
56. Walter Benjamin *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*
57. George Orwell *Books v. Cigarettes*
58. Albert Camus *The Fastidious Assassins*
59. Frantz Fanon *Concerning Violence*
60. Michel Foucault *The Spectacle of the Scaffold*
61. Lao Tzu *Tao Te Ching*
62. *Writings from the Zen Masters*
63. Thomas More *Utopia*
64. Michel de Montaigne *On Solitude*
65. William Shakespeare *On Power*
66. John Locke *Of the Abuse of Words*
67. Samuel Johnson *Consolation in the Face of Death*
68. Immanuel Kant *An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'*
69. Joseph de Maistre *The Executioner*
70. Thomas De Quincey *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*
71. Arthur Schopenhauer *The Horrors and Absurdities of Religion*
72. Abraham Lincoln *The Gettysburg Address*
73. Karl Marx *Revolution and War*
74. Fyodor Dostoyevsky *The Grand Inquisitor*
75. William James *On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings*
76. Robert Louis Stevenson *An Apology for Idlers*
77. W. E. B. Du Bois *Of the Dawn of Freedom*
78. Virginia Woolf *Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid*

79. George Orwell *Decline of the English Murder*

80. John Berger *Why Look at Animals?*